



Kyou Kara Maou - Volume 15

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Novel Illustrations

Prologue



To my dearest father...

It happened rather suddenly, but you have grandchildren now.

I wonder what expression you'll have when you find out? But you are a naturally shy person, perhaps you will resist the smile on your face until your cheeks muscles cramp, or maybe you'll threaten to bury my whole body into the ground, leaving only my head on the surface.

But I believe you will be ecstatic to have new members in the family.

Their hair color and the thinness of their beards look just like you, no matter how I look at it, probably due to a trans-generation inheritance. And just like you they're always saying things like "useless Pony, silly Pony", probably also because of a trans-generation inheritance. And the way they express their feelings is very

rough and painful, also like you...

For some reason, I'm feeling lonelier and lonelier.

Why is Pony the only one that looks different?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1



"Interesting!"

The moment he found out that the person standing in front of us was Josak, Adalbert's face lit with joy.

He's swinging his hand in which he was holding a big sword. He's so excited that he could attack the group in front at any moment.

"This is good, we can settle the match that was left undecided sometime ago!"

"Stop, Adalbert! If you do that Murata will...."

The pain in my left hand suddenly increased and I crouched down on the hard

soil. The light crimson colored ring was eating into my little finger.

"Your majesty"

Conrad got down on his knees and with his hands rubbed the finger I was gripping.

"...Its fine, I'm alright. I know the reason behind it"

This means that Yelshi has gotten closer. It might be Yelshi himself who is manipulating this, it belongs to his mother after all, and he might have invoked a curse or something. If it gets worse, I begin to think that I'll have to cut down my finger. But right now the pain isn't unbearable.

"If I grip it tightly like this, it feels better. More importantly, stop Adalbert. If they are attacked liked that, I don't know what will happen to Murata"

"Hey, what's wrong Maou, noticing the color I thought it was a ring, but is that a curse stone?"

However fortunately, looks like Adalbert's attention has been drawn by my finger. He raised the heavy sword to his shoulder like a fishing rod and started looking down. He still hasn't rushed to the enemy line.

"Did you get it from someone? If you're going to beg for something in any case then instead of begging for something as useless as this at least beg for something useful. Something like insect repellent or a draft to pass through"

"Shut up! Yuuri, you can't take it off?"

When I thought that the setting sun had been blocked, it was Wolfram who was peeking. I can't have even him worry about me. He himself is carrying that ominous sack.

"I can't get it off, but I'm alright. This is not the time to wor...ry about it."

I raised my face and focused on the group right in front of us.

I felt like it was even harder to see than before, although I remember the anxiety from my just recovered eyesight, I immediately understood it was due to the darkness in the surroundings. The sun had approached the horizon, the heavens are turning vermilion and the ground is turning grey.

The person with the same color as that sky is on a horse right in front of us. It's Gurrier Josak. Although I thought that he had lost his life because of me, that sadness was overcome in the worst form.

The Emperor of Seisakoku Yelshi had mounted on a white horse aligned near him. He has the same hair, same eyes and same face as the king of Shou Shimaron Saralegui who is beside me.

And at their feet was my friend who had been thrown like a piece of rag cloth. It's Murata Ken.

"...Murata?"

Of course even if I whisper, it won't reach him.

"Murataaa!"

Even when I screamed, there wasn't any sign of movement. He was lying on the dried ground just like that he doesn't even twitch a bit. Even though, he was moving a little while ago. Only the wind carrying sand is caressing his dusty hair.

"Murata, it couldn't be, such a thing...."

"Calm down Yuuri. His Eminence is alive. There's no way they would kill their hostage so easily"

"...hostage?"

"That's right."

At nearly the same time as Conrad nodded, in a clear boy's voice Saralegui was talking to his younger twin brother. Although his tone is not at all impressive, it's not like my bewildered undignified distraught tone either. It was the voice of a king that doesn't lose his calm.

"Yelshi."

If I peek from diagonally below, although I wouldn't say that he's enjoying himself but those were the eyes that did not show even a little despair even when he's in a predicament.

"Speak up, Yelshi, using such underhanded methods, what do you wish to gain? Oh little brother, I wonder if you're sad, was it that you can't understand

Shimaron accent well. Then I'll say it for you in Seisakoku language. Listen Yelshi, what is it that you desire?"

Following that Saralegui questioned him in Seisakoku language which we couldn't understand.

"Exchange"

And then Yelshi answered in common language. That's right he can speak common language. Although one could say that he's not fluent.

"Exchange with this man. The King of Shou Shimaron and the Maou of Shin Makoku"

"Yuuri and I?"

"That's right Sara. You and Yuuri"

The moment Yelshi took my name, the pain in my little finger became more intense. Rather than calling it pain, it was a strong numbness which ran from my arm to my spine. When I thought that passing through my cervical vertebrae it had reached to the back of my head, along with it a symptom I'm not used to appeared.

Along with the surge of pain and numbness, the voice that I had just heard now came flowing in.

"In exchange for this double black, I want Saralegui and the Maou of Shin Makoku"

What...?

"To the mazoku, Shou Shimaron is as good as an enemy. So Saralegui is immediately going to back out. But, what will the Maou do? Even if your subordinates will stop you, what will the Maou himself do? I don't believe this kind and foolish man will sacrifice this double black for his sake"

This isn't the first time that a person's voice is echoing deep inside my chest. I've experienced it so many times up till now. But I feel that it's different this time around. The words are not coming from deep within myself but they are being transmitted along with the pain from outside. What is this rough bad feeling irritating the surface of my skin.

"If you had fallen into our hands without causing so much trouble yesterday, we could have ended this without having much trouble"

Is he talking about the fire?

On the other hand my real hearing is catching Saralegui's questions.

"In other words you want to trap Yuuri and me in Seisakoku and make Shou Shimaron and Shin Makoku to follow you?"

Without even replying, Yelshi smiled. As if his big brother is arching his pale lips and smiling with the same face.

"Obediently playing the part of a dim-witted younger brother, you surprised me and Yuuri"

"Hey, don't count me together with...you."

Yelshi's voice echoes along with the pain.

"It's much more simpler than signing a treaty. And I've heard that among the mazoku the special ones are given special treatment...."

I held my head with both my arms. I plunge my fingers into my hair, the ring touched near to my ear. As if it's serving as a sound collector, the voice comes from there and resonates directly in my bones.



"Even though originally, the extremist group that didn't wish for diplomatic relations with Shimaron was supposed to abduct you. Since they let you slip through and escape that time, I had to lend them my hand. I don't know by what coincidence it overlapped but you really have good luck."

I lost the power in my knees and ended up collapsing on my back. Lord Weller's arm was there as if he had predicted it. My back touched the body warmth that I was used to.

"...Then...in that case, even the ones who targeted Sara on the execution ground, even the living dead army that attacked in the underground, everything was his instigation. Even the plight after running off into the underground passageway... and because of that..."

When I raised my face, there was man with orange hair in my line of sight. But those emotionless eyes, looking past here are facing the void. They are not looking at the sky or at the sand or even at me.

At his feet Murata has been rolled up. It couldn't be helped that I was anxious whether he was hurt or not.

"Everything happened because of him... it turned out like this..."

Saralegui whispered yes, that's right. This was not a thought transmitted over the ring but his real voice.

"You're more of a bad child then I though."

They're truly brothers.

I'll give you time till the sun goes down.

After saying that in a tone similar to his brother, Yelshi disappeared in the middle of the army. Although I can't see clearly from here, there seems to be something like a camp at the center. Even though I looked straining my just recovered eyes, since the soldiers standing in front are a hindrance and I cannot confirm.

"Being among a group of the dead, if it was me, I'd refuse to spend even a second there."

While seeing off the back of the young Emperor of Seisakoku, Adalbert sheathe his sword.

"Firstly, won't it be stinking. I'm curious about him too. He has some nerve to stand in such a place and be the leader."

Even after Yelshi has left, Josak was in front of the group. Maybe he's keeping a watch so that Murata can't escape.

What in the world might he be thinking about, even I and Conrad don't know that. No, before that I couldn't even affirm whether he's the real Josak or not from a faraway place. Rather he seemed to be fake. Just like twins that are often spotted among the Shinzoku, how good would it be if he just had the same looks as Gurrier Josak and inside was a completely different personality.

May the man whose doing such things to Murata not be Josak.

Although that is what I want to pray for, there's exists another fear at a corner of my head.

If that man is not Gurrier Josak, then the Josak that I know is in the middle of the underground passageway... When I tried to deny those dreadful memories, I closed my eyes tightly and shook my head.

This is not the time to be grief stricken. Just think about rescuing Murata right now.

"Although I'm talking as if the army of the dead does not exist, but aren't there walking bones in Shin Makoku? Isn't it not much different than that?"

"It's completely different. The kohi are living. They don't just walk, there are some that even fly. That's their species. They have curtailed all the parts that need to be curtailed, that's their simple yet stylish body. Look carefully, they're not similar at all. Aren't those guys are clearly a dead body in their last stage of decomposition."

"Is that so? I think they're the same."

"They are clearly different."

If you look at it like that then the kotsuhizoku and the kotsuchizoku do have some cute points. When they find a good graveyard they become infatuation with it and start digging, properly burying the lower half from their pelvis with taking a half body bath, and they leisurely get entranced too, when they're really

surprised their skull becomes detached, and falls on the floor just like that. At such times the kohi are an unexpectedly cute group. For loving rare animals, they're just irresistible.

And compared to that how is the resurrected army. When you think that they are carrying weapons with those thin arms that could break off, aren't they attacking us living beings. Furthermore without resting in peace after having their arms or legs cut, they even need to be hit on their head.

Even with just a little rotten meat and flesh remaining, to have become such disgusting things.

"Our kohi move on their own will, but isn't the resurrected army being manipulated?"

"That's right. His, Yelshi's mother, she did seem to have such powers."

"When you say Yelshi's mother... isn't she a mother to you too Sara."

"Biologically. But the previous ruler of Seisakoku was the woman who abandoned me."

"...That's most probably because she must have had some dire circumstances."

There was no proof even to oppose him, I just evaded it with vague words. I couldn't possibly say that I had seen it in my dream.

"It's fine. Yelshi obtained mother's country from mother, and I went along with father and obtained his country, each one inherited their own."

"If you think of it, you two are the world's best celeb twins."

"What's celeb? Is it that thing that's on a fish's back?"

Even if he pretends to be cute and tilts his head, he won't be able to make a pass on me now.

"That's right, somehow looks like last night's fire was also Yelshi's doing."

"How did you know that?"

"That's because he thought it to be so."

I thrusted the light crimson colored stone in front of my face. Due to the little evening sunlight it was not its original color, it was turning into a color which

looked liked white had been printed vermilion.

"Maybe in undulations to his feelings, this ring gets tighter. And I think along with that it's transmitting his thoughts to me. In fact now that this pain has stopped his words don't flow. Even though I couldn't hear it at all the last time, but this time around I could understand it, which means that either I've started remembering Seisakoku language or at that time Yelshi......"

"What's that convenient product?"

He raised his eyebrows, while still keeping his lovely mouth open, Saralegui grabbed my finger.

"I've never heard of such an enjoyable mechanism. Let me borrow it for a while Yuuri. Even I want to peek into Yelshi's heart."

"Ow ow, it hurts! Hey, wait Sara, don't be so forceful."

"I said let me borrow it."

With the strong power that doesn't suite such slenderness, he even pulled the skin around my finger. To add to it his pointed nails eat into my skin. The nails of a king who had a sheltered upbringing, seem to grow longer even if left neglected for just a few days.

Before Conrad and Wolfram could step in and stop him, I somehow managed to pull back my arm with my own strength.

"Spare me. Since its tight to begin with, it won't come off so easily, will it!?"

"You don't want to take it off? You don't want to return it, hmmm. So you were just acting that you disliked it so much."

"I'll return it properly to you later. Having cut it into two equal parts that is."

For the time being, I had no intentions of returning it to its original owner. More than confronting them friends or foes like this, this ring can be pretty useful. Even if it's accompanied by some pain, if I can read what's deep within Yelshi's heart then nothing is better than that.

Even if I say that, until Yelshi reveals his feelings and I make contact with him, this is nothing more than an annoying accessory. It didn't even read his thoughts.

Without any plan, without even the wisdom to take measures, being extremely perplexed I hugged my knees above the sand.

"...If it's same as a game, then the zombie group must be weak against fire, right."

Wolfram who was standing next to me folded his knees. And soon the emerald green eyes were sparkling close to me. His fire techniques are magnificent. By controlling a fire beast effectively, he could burn down only the dead.

"Don't do it."

But if I think about the nature of the locality, I couldn't let him do something unreasonable.

"Why are you stopping me."

"Didn't you say that magic doesn't work in the land of the Shinzoku."

"But.."

"Even if you have Gunter's protector, how can I let you do such a reckless thing!"

"Boys! Enough of your playing around."

Hazel Graves returned. She ran her horse through the east and west and had confirmed the scope of the enemy from the sides.

"Shouldn't you decide something which must be decided."

She nimbly jumped down from her horse. If I judge from her smile less look, the reconnaissance results must have not been optimistic at all.

"Even if it's just a rough plan, I want you to tell me. Are you going to run away or are you going to strike."

"Basically, run away."

"That's the safest plan. Then next, are you going to snatch the hostage and run away or it's a pity but just like this..."

"We don't have a choice there."

"Are you serious?"

Conrad, who hadn't interjected, raised one eyebrow slightly. The one with the scar, it was his right eyebrow. Hazel without even looking at him deepened the wrinkles near her mouth.

"It's such a coincidence. Even I have never chosen to abandon my comrades."

"I'm glad."

I patted my chest.

"Although I do have that option."

I didn't want to tut thinking it's someone else's problem. Adalbert was insisting on exchanging at least one round.

"I won't ask you not to run away, but if you're going to run away swiftly anyways let's take those guys by surprise and retreat while they are kicking about. We can just save that double black later after merging with the other search parties. If you like it, you can get this old lady and the many living people here involved too. I can't think that you'd expect me to be a helper though."

"I refuse that plan too. I'm worried about Murata's body till we can attack them again. It shouldn't be a problem if he as healthy as me, but with that weakened condition, can I even leave him like that for even a day."

Adalbert snorted lightly and erased the sand painting he was drawing with his toes.

"Well, whether it's rescuing or fleeing I don't side with either. For now if I just get to cross swords with Gurrier."

"You can't, if I leave it to you, you're quite capable of letting him die."

"I think its unnatural to show any mercy to a traitor."

"Whether he has betrayed us or not is still..."

"Even after that?"

He points at the group in front. Without any room for justification, I clogged at my words.

"Hey, let me do it. Hasn't it turned into something interesting this time for that bastard who harshly calls others traitors. I'd really love to hear from him what it

feels like. By using..."

He tapped on the long sword he wore on his waist.

"This."

Although this is frustrating, what Adalbert is said was right. It's difficult to defend the man who hurt Murata and is leading the enemy. Furthermore, even though I thought that he had lost his life because of me, the happiness of our reunion has vanished in a moment.

Come to think of it, a little while ago I was in a similar situation.

A precious friend, who had disappeared, appeared in front of my eyes wearing a military uniform I'm not used to, and of all things as the enemy warrior. Even at that time I thought that he had been brainwashed, and I desperately tried to convince me that he was being manipulated. Lord Weller affiliated himself with Dai Shimaron on his own will and put on that brown and yellow colored military uniform.

If even Josak is the same then....

Conrad is here. So to speak, currently he's in a truce agreement with us, at least he's not hostility towards us. Isn't even Josak limited to such a thing.

I bit my lips. The smell of rust spreads rapidly in my mouth.

"I really can't allow you. Unfortunately that's not what needs to be done immediately."

If I twist half my body and look back, the equestrian people who followed us from behind, were together at a distance of seven horses. It was evidently the feel of wait and watch.

"The only one who can stop those guys is you."

"What?"

Adalbert's voice is clearly filled with dissatisfaction.

"At least they will do something even if they receive a word from you. Since you are their savior."

"As if I care."

"It's not that you care. You're the savior of the people from the desert. Since you have already taken up that status, fulfill it till the very end."

Although the man who was like a migratory bird carrying a mermaid, looked at my face and said something, he worried from around three seconds and then shut his mouth.

Since it couldn't be helped, he raised his heavy hip and turned his enviable body back. The equestrian people who confirmed his appearance, rode their horses till they got very close to us.

"Alright, listen up you rascals!"

His voice was such that it resonated throughout the field.

"It couldn't be that you guys have forgotten that I did you a favor by feeding you delicious rice!"

There was no reaction from the equestrian people. Although I can't see clearly in the twilight, under the food that had been avoiding sand there must have been making a puzzled expression.

"Alright, remember, the dinner you enjoyed that day. The sand mice pot that everyone encircled."

This is starting to sound like the words of a graduation ceremony.

"We danced till morning, the huge bon fire... wait, they don't understand my words."

"I'll translate it for you. After all you let me ride behind you up till a while ago right?"

Without even waiting for an answer Saralegui started translating Adalbert's common language into Seisakoku language. Keeping both his hands near his mouth he shouts.

Although we didn't have the slightest idea of what he's saying, it's way longer than the lines before translation. Hazel who was well versed in Seisakoku language smiled.

"Oh my, oh my."

"Is he saying something strange? Is he badmouthing me?"

"He's not really slandering anyone, he's saying something interesting indeed. Should I translate it for you. Listen carefully my friends, the savior is saying this."

If I rely on Hazel Graves Translation Theater then, Saralegui made a megaphone with his slender fingers and looks like this is what he's speaking.

"Alright, listen carefully. The savior is saying this. My brethren, you must not hurt this group. I am... ah, this is not the savior but ME."

He pats his chest several times.

"This is about me. I am the double of Seisakoku's Emperor Yelshi! I am the double. That person on the horse right there is Seisakoku's Emperor Yelshi himself. That's why it's useless even if you kidnap me, since the real one is there."

Adalbert, who is the savior, was also bewildered.

"...Hey, I wasn't speaking for that long."

"It's alright, just leave it to me. And the savior is also saying this. Although the one who is here is just a humble double, but since he's a comrade who has sat at the dinner table, he's already as good as a friend to the equestrian people. You must not hurt him no matter what."

It was such a good talk for our circumstance that I could raise my voice in admiration. He did well to come up with such a believable thing in an instant. It must be the talent of a certain species.

The equestrian people glanced at each other and after nodding their heads raised some doubts.

"Yomosue."

"Yomosue."

"Mermaid."

Without any translation, what I could understand was only the last word. Maybe it was the same with Adalbert, he dropped his shoulders in dismay.

"...Is food and mermaid the only thing they're interested in."

Saralegui bending his pale lips makes a beautiful smile.

"But isn't the mermaid a symbol of the savior? The mermaid and you are the same thing. They are asking why the savior is not holding the mermaid."

Even during that time the equestrian people's calls were getting violent.

"Mermaid"

"Mermaid"

"Maidmer"

"You're being too noisy!"

Adalbert imposingly threw a tantrum and shook the fist he was gripping.

"Didn't I come to your village since I was the God who protects mermaids! If you keep on causing trouble like this then my mermaid will spout out fire!"

"Ehh!"

I wasn't the only one who was surprised. Even Wolfram is making a face that he was caught by surprise.

Will spout fire...

My yearning for a mermaid along with a fragile image crumbled away.

However thanks to this super translation, an explanation which you can even call a hoax, from here on the equestrian people targeting Saralegui will come to a conclusion. Exactly because they had believed that Saralegui was Yelshi, they had thought of kidnapping him and demanding for ransom.

If he's a mere double then they have no use for him.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

The enemy really does hold back their soldiers as promised, not approaching even a step.

Not making any moves at all despite having so many pieces in hand, feels even scarier.

"But why don't they attack us all in one go, and spend so much time exchanging hostages instead? They can win by numbers alone, or is there a reason they can't make a move?"

"You have to ask?"

Hazel stares at the resurrection group on standby, as well as Josak, standing in the middle like a general, and says, "Those guys are corpses, so they like the night. A long, long time ago, the undead could only move outside after dark. As long as there's sunlight, their movements won't be as agile as at night, right?"

I see, putting aside the viral disease plot point that's spreading like wildfire these days, most zombie flicks take place at night. If we follow this principle, their movements should be as slow as the undead of the early eras. But we've gained quite a bit of experience from our previous battles, their movements are actually rather agile.

The sun will set soon.

Murata's glasses, having fallen onto the ground, sparkle in the last rays of the sunset, the sky further away from the sun slowly turning purple. Even the sand, now dyed orange, will soon turn to dark grey, followed by the nightfall.

At that point we'll be in their territory.

"Should we grab His Eminence while they're still sluggish, and then make a break for the encampment following the way we came?"

Compared to the enemy side, our side moves a lot more, because Hazel's friends who finally caught up and Mr Ajira are helping us collect dry grass. There

are very few plants here on this dry land, and we really need some fuel for a fire.

Looking at the busy Seisakoku people, I reply to Wolfram's question,

"Not a bad idea, this way we can get to somewhere safe and they can't catch up."

But as soon as the words leave my mouth I change my mind.

"No, it won't work. If the sun just happens to set at that time, they will catch up with us. If we escape to the encampment, we'll cause them to attack the equestrian tribe's village."

There are still children there, mothers, and elderly with no place in battle, I can't drag them down with us.

"Then what do we do?"

"I haven't figured it out yet."

But we must make a decision in the short time before the sun sets. After all, I was the one who brought everyone here in the beginning, I just can't say something like "Don't ask me if anything happens".

As for my advisor – Murata Ken, he's currently suffering alone in a distant place.

Just thinking about how lonely and scared he must be right now, makes me jumpy and uneasy.

"Damn!"

I kick the deep grey sand, the tips of my toes hurting because the unfamiliar shoes hit the hard ground. I hate myself for my uselessness, and keep experiencing that pain over and over again.

Maybe she can't stand my embarrassing attitude anymore, Hazel crosses her arms over her chest and says to Conrad, "It should at least be good news that the other side doesn't have SHOOTERs, right?"

"They don't have archers?"

"That's right, just the fact that we don't have enemies that attack long range is already very LUCKY."

"It is indeed good news."

Conrad and Hazel seem to be thinking about the same thing. If the resurrection group without muscles can pull a bow, that would be way against the rules.

"So it's okay as long as we don't get close to them?"

"For now at least, at the very least we don't have to worry about snipers. Even if we fight seriously, it will only be melee battles, we just have to be careful of enemies within arms' reach."

"Since we don't have to worry about arrows coming when our backs are turned, there's also less risk when retreating."

"Is that so? Is that the only good news?"

Hazel shakes her head of white hair, then nods,

"So sorry."

Conrad touches the scar on his right eyebrow with his index and middle fingers, then puts down his right hand, rubbing his thigh with his fingers, as though wiping away blood on his hand.

"If we must resolve this peacefully, this will be a problem..."

"How is that possible, the enemy is long dead, right!?"

How could we resolve things peacefully faced with a troop of zombies.

"If we have no choice but to fight, Adalbert and I can probably take down quite a few, Wolfram should be okay too. Judging from the feeling I got last time we fought..."

Maybe because 'fighting with zombies' is an interesting thing, Conrad laughs lightly from deep within his throat, "I understand their abilities very clearly. They slow down considerably as soon as you cut off their heads, so they're not really a threat."

"How many to how many? I don't mean odds, but enemy numbers... I'm sorry to make you give a number."

"It's probably one to ten... or fifteen? To soldiers, this should be only natural."

"I can take down twenty!"

"I understand mazokus don't give up easily, but I want to hear the truth, without exaggeration. Sigh, there should be about two hundred zombies, huh? Add that to seven or eight human soldiers... and him. Our aim is to save Murata, and find a way to handle Josak... such as tying him up, or making him lose consciousness, basically to incapacitate him so he can't resist. Can we do it?"

"Hey hey hey, this is completely different from what you said just now, right?"

Adalbert rushes out immediately upon hearing that. Because the great messiah pulled in the equestrian tribe for us, and also because of his persuasiveness plus Saralegui's exaggerated translations, the desert equestrian people have quieted down considerably.

"Didn't we say "grab His Eminence and then make a break for it!"? Why are we suddenly analyzing battle power? Are we changing battle plans?"

"We haven't decided."

"I say, Young Master—No, Your Majesty the Maou, how many men do you have? Even if the cocky His Excellency the third son is very loyal, right now Lord Weller is the ambassador from Dai Shimaron, right?"

I can only nod and admit to that.

"Sizemore may be an excellent soldier, but that eye-blinding man can't even act as a meat shield, can he? The only shiny thing is that head, rather than a warrior, he's more like a miscellaneous man. And those thin, weak slaves, no matter what weapons they're holding they can't fool anyone, y'know. Who else do you have? Hah?"

"There's still you, Grantz."

"Is that so? There's still me. Mn, I... What!? You included me in as well?"

"Didn't you just say you want to fight?"

"I just wanted to cross swords with Gurrier!"

Maybe he completely didn't expect this result, because Adalbert seems especially nervous, his white skin turning immediately red, "Stop joking, aren't you misunderstanding something? Not only am I after your life, I even left my hometown while it's in the middle of rebuilding, I even left Shin Makoku! How

could I possibly listen to the Maou's orders?"

"How unseemly, Adalbert. If you're a mazoku, you should obediently obey the promise you made."

"When did I ever promise anything!"

"You did. You said as long as I gave you a crate of expensive Bielefeld wine in exchange, you'll willingly do anything I ask you to. That's what you said on the ship.

Adalbert exclaims an 'ah!', his thick arm stopping in mid-air.

"O-on the boat?"

"Yup, that's right."

Maybe it's just me, but it feels as though Adalbert's powerful muscles shrivel quite a lot, looks like he's a man who easily makes mistakes because of alcohol. Wolfram, too, uses poisonous words unbefitting his pretty face to add salt to the wound, "Oh dear, don't tell me you want to say you were drunk then? That can't be possible, people call you the Grantz boss, how could you have gotten drunk on one barrel of wine? By the way, you also said you don't sleep while hugging baby bears anymore."

Hearing that unknown fact, I can't help but mutter to Conrad,

"Hugging baby bears... Wine sure is scary—I better not touch it in my life!"

"Actually, it's fine in moderate amounts, Your Majesty."

Afterwards, according to my investigations, it seems there was never 'a promise on the ship'. Wolf replies with a straight face, "I was just winging it."

He even tells me, "He's the man who betrayed Shin Makoku, and stood on the humans' side. I really hate my uncle and Grantz, rather than giving Adalbert wine, I'd rather pour the highest quality grape wine into the river."

To think he could tell such a lie so easily, seems like he's matured too.

"Then how many can you take on?"

"As long as I can defeat Gurrier, I'm happy!"

"Can you stop making a fuss? If you stay hung up on Gurrier any longer, I'll tell

my brother!"

I didn't think bringing up Lord von Voltaire's name would have any effect on Adalbert, who left Shin Makoku to wander around. But the moment he said "I'll tell my brother", everyone can't help but cower and apologize, why is that?

Even this muscleman can't seem to handle the "Tell My Brother Strategy". The word "Onii-chan" sure is powerful, that's why I refuse to say it no matter what.

"If it's me... Twenty-two of them."

As I thought, they refuse to give in.

"So how many is that altogether? Uh—Fifteen, twenty, twenty-two, that's seventy-five in total! Hm—That's not even half of them, even if Captain Sizemore and all his men get here in time, we probably can't handle even a hundred of them."

"Yuuri, you still plan to..."

Wolfram tries to say something, but Lord Weller puts a hand on his shoulder, looking at him and shaking his head. As expected of brothers, they understand each other telepathically even without words.

Even if I see their brotherly camaraderie, it doesn't change the fact that we're at a disadvantage. Naively I think, "If I keep staring, will the enemy numbers decrease?" and turn my gaze to the enemy lines.

There isn't any movement there, and it's pin-drop silent.

This atmosphere, this silence, suddenly reminds me of a cemetery at night.

"I really hate this sort of silence."

Hazel and Conrad raise their heads at almost the same time.

"Yesterday, too, waiting for something to happen like today, I know I have a bad temper but this feeling is even more annoying, and painful. Because the enemy is right in front of my eyes, my friend is right in front of my eyes, but..."

I can't save him—I bury my face in between my knees, so no one can hear those words.



Adalbert rubs the decoration of his sword sheath, saying calmly, "It is indeed rare for the king to appear at the frontlines himself." "Is that so?"

"Other than Shinou, I heard there are only two others who went to the frontlines of their own volition."

"Surely Yuuri will be praised by the poets in the future as a brave king, huh? Although in truth you're such a noob."

"Noob... That's right, it's because I'm a noob that I can't stand this atmosphere."

Wolfram leans back slightly and makes fun at me, but until now I can't think of a decent strategy, so I don't even have the energy to retort him.

"But once we start taking action we won't have time to catch our breaths anymore, in any case it's always like this before a battle. If the battle were extended, not only will both sides decide on a day of ceasefire, the villages nearby would even come over to sell food."

"You bought food from the locals before!?"

"That's right."

"How could you be so careless, and what about the supply troops, have you thought about them?"

"You guys rarely come to the frontlines anyway."

"Even so you can't buy from the locals, what if you get poisoned?"

"The worst that could happen is we get stomachaches, it's still better than starving as we wait for supplies. Besides, how can live mountain goats and sheep be poisonous? Don't tell me they've been eating poisonous feed since they were born? If you had the time and energy to do that, wouldn't it be more effective to attack the idiots camping out in the open with flaming arrows? But even I only came across such easy battles a few times back in the beginning."

Adalbert pulls his sword out of its sheath and points it at the sky,

"Anyway, that was when I learned how to kill goats."

The steel glitters with an ominous color under the twilight rays, giving one's imagination a direct image.

"...No matter what I can't do it."

"I think most gourmets who enjoy meat can't kill livestock either, sheesh! Just like a certain aristocrat who gets shocked out of his wits when you just toss a

little goat at him, even yelling "Don't torture the baby goaty!" That's why whenever I want to throw something, I'll grab Maxine."

"Wait a sec, if you want to throw something you can throw a ball, right?"

The only sports involving throwing people around are judo and sumo wrestling, so throwing little goats is in fact animal abuse. If someone randomly picked up livestock not meant for eating and thrown them around, you'd scold him even if you're not Gwendal. As long as that doesn't count as local culture...

"Conrad."

Something occurs to me, and I call out to the man who knows Earth very well.

"Have you been to Mongolia?"

"Mongolia?"

He muses over it for a moment, and then replies,

"If it's in Afghan, I have indeed seen a strange sport over there. It was an intense competition similar to polo, where people rode on horses and fought over goats or sheep."

"Exactly, that's the one! That sport that's like acrobatics!"

Sitting on horseback and bending over to grab the goat from the ground, then protect it from enemy hands and return to base—that's the sport that appears in my mind. As long as we send a few horses into the enemy lines at once, and use this method to grab Murata then run, we might be able to get past the enemies who consist mostly of foot soldiers.

Even if we can't run towards the equestrian tribe's encampment, if we investigated the geography here a bit more, we could avoid the east and head towards the sea, maybe we might be able to reach the search ships.

But in that case we might have to hang in there for a few days... No, there's a chance we could rendezvous with the other search teams on the way. If only things would go that smoothly.

Murata isn't all that heavy either, the only question is if anyone can ride a galloping horse up to him at a hair's breadth away and then reach out to grab him.

Of course, this job can't go to Wolfram. He'd probably lose it if I told him directly, but the position required is very challenging, and you'd need to pull up a high school student with one hand. Therefore not only would you need good riding skills, you also need powerful arm strength.

I never considered myself from the start. I just learned how to ride a horse on my own, after all.

If we're talking about arm strength, the only candidates left are Captain Sizemore and Adalbert, but at the same time I'm worried the captain's stomach might get in the way, even if it doesn't stick out that much—More importantly, I don't know how his riding skills are like. Someone without brilliant riding skills wouldn't be able to complete the mission.

Hazel Graves winks at me,

"If you're talking about horse-riding, the experts are right there, y'know!"

I follow Hazel's gaze and see an equestrian tribe member taking care of a horse, even caressing its neck sympathetically.

Oh yeah, the top horse-riding experts are right in front of us.

"They chased us here."

So I immediately ask the messiah about them.

"Amongst the equestrian people, are there any you would call elites?"

"Hmm, if it's nothing to do with liking mermaids and fighting power, I guess they're pretty good."

"If we ask them to ride horses, they should become even stronger, right?"

The legendary messiah rubs his perfect butt-chin as he replies,

"They claim they were born on horseback. Though I don't think any woman would give birth there."

"But Yuuri, they're chasing after me in order to get a ransom, y'know. Rather than soldiers, they're more like debt collectors."

"Debt collectors? If only they could collect it."

"That's right, they should be able to pull it off."

"Yeah, it should be easy as pie, right?"

Seeing the way Conrad's agreement lightens my mood, Saralegui interrupts from the side, "Not bad, huh~ Yuuri, you thought up a decent strategy, then allow me to translate it for you!"

"No need, I have no hopes for your translations."

If it was just the meaning that got lost in translation then it's still not too bad, but if you randomly add things on your own, even we might made out to be bad guys. Although we're translating it from weird English to the Seisakoku language in a unique way, but it's still better to ask Hazel for help.

However when it comes to convincing the equestrian people, Hazel Graves seems somewhat reluctant, completely unlike her usual style.

"The way I see it, this plan could work. And as long as we discuss it with them in detail, I believe the desert people would also be willing to help, then the only issue is the reward."

"I see, we can use money!"

"That's right, it's okay if we pay the reward later too. Only, Your Majesty, if you ask me to tell them the strategy, I don't think they will listen obediently."

"Why?"

Hazel... now known as Venera, shows me a crooked, self-deprecating smile,

"Because I belong to the slave class."

"Eh? This isn't the city full of conceited people."

"Such prejudices are even stronger the more backwater the place is."

"But wasn't their attitude perfectly normal before? The same goes for the people at the oasis!"

"That's because we didn't do anything to cross the line. They assume we're docile slaves who serve His Majesty and PRINCE, as well as His Majesty Saralegui who looks like the perfect shinzoku city person, that's why they weren't harsh on us."

Although he's listening to a foreign language, Mr Ajira may have deduced what

we're talking about through our tone, lowering his head unhappily.

"But if lowly slaves speak to regular citizens as equals, that's something else altogether. Because the desert tribes don't belong to the slave class, even if their lives aren't as good as the city people, they have the important duty to protect the royal tombs, so they still count as citizens of Seisakoku... even though they don't work that seriously. It's just that this way, even if what I say is reasonable, they won't agree. Because many of them think it's unfeasible to agree to something suggested by a slave."

"There's no such thing, Hazel! No, Venera!"

Venera cocks her head and shrugs helplessly, shaking her soft-looking hair,

"Even if it's slightly hard to understand the common language, but I think it's better if Your Majesty talked to them directly through Ajira's translations, and it's more practical too."

"But the one who suggested asking the equestrian tribe for help isn't me, it's you. I can't do something like stealing your credit."

"My comrades and I won't mind stuff like that."

"That's true, but..."

My sentence stops at 'but', I can't continue.

Wolfram was watching our conversation from a side, and finally breaks the awkward moment, "So all you need is position?"

With his hands on his hips, he tilts his upper body back, his tone sounding as though he understands the English we're speaking.

"In that case, just make her our goodwill ambassador. Won't it be fine if you make this old woman Seisakoku's goodwill ambassador to Seisakoku right now?"

"That's right!"

It's just like Japanese celebs that go to Hawaii often, or eat so many Hawaiian beans they get such a title. Although I don't know what the conditions are, the situation now is dire, so as head of the country I'll elect her as goodwill ambassador, in order to get everyone's understanding.

"That makes sense, even if they're looking upon as slaves in this country, with a title like ambassador they'll have the proper position to make their opinions heard. Looks you're not just a pretty face, your brain is not bad either!"

Completely ignoring how Mr Ajira the translator is explaining things to the equestrian people, Saralegui tells us their conversation with an innocent smile, "They're saying the friend of the body double is pretty impressive—"

"C-Crap!"

"Really, Yuuri, you forgot the roles you set in the beginning? I'm playing Yelshi's body double, and you're my friend from a foreign country, right?"

"Waa—that's right! The body double's friend doesn't have much right to say anything."

At this important moment, my black eyes and hair have no effect at all. Although I really hate getting special treatment, it's rather inconvenient to be treated as a normal person too. Wolfram looks at me, all dejected, in surprise.

"Why are you all depressed?"

"Nah—Although having people serve me makes me panic, but being completely overlooked makes me feel uncomfortable too. This reminds me of my life as a benchwarmer—"

"No matter what others say, they can't change the fact that Yuuri is Yuuri, so why are you bothered about?"

"You're right."

What he's saying is absolutely right, but he's a pretty boy with a flawless background and looks, plus he's naturally confident, so of course he can hold his head high and say that. I'm just a baseball boy from a normal family, even if he tells me righteously not to be scared, I still don't know what to do.

"It is indeed very hard for you, since you're still immature."

"Mn? You're not calling me a rookie anymore?"

He blinks his eyes, as emerald as the bottom of a clear lake, and says,

"Well—You've been on the throne for quite a while, after all."

"Have I grown just a little bit as well?"

"I guess there's a little change. But in the time you changed from a rookie to immature, you still couldn't come up with a solution to convince the people. Sigh —Really, then allow me to do what little I can for Your Majesty."

Wolfram rants away with a smile on his face, then takes out a roll of thin paper from his pocket. It's a pale green slip with a smooth and shiny surface that makes it look really high class. And then he reaches his hand into his chest hair... No no no, into the little wool pouch hanging in front of his chest, and pulls out stationary from inside.

Goodness, to think 'Günter's Protection' has such a use too.

"Since your identity is false, of course your authority is electing an official isn't recognized. Alright, turn around!"

I don't know what he writes on the pale green slip, and he doesn't seem to be bothered by how uneven my back is, either, writing and signing his name fluidly. I don't care what you're doing, but that really is very ticklish.

"Wolf, what are you writing..."

"I elect you as the Bielefeld territory's goodwill ambassador to Seisakoku. See!"

"What?"

He waves the paper in front of my face. Having lived more than eighty years as an aristocratic heir, he seems used to homework like this, easily giving Venera a position.

"This is something we do commonly in the territory. Choose a suitable representative from amongst the people and honor them with a title in public, so that uniting the people will henceforth be his job, and he doesn't have to come to us for some of the small stuff too."

"Is that so~~ To think you're so used to these things."

"Although I'm a soldier loyal to the Maou in the capital, my job when I'm back at my territory is more like an administrator."

"Are you learning how to be a good leader? What mature thinking—"

Just in case, I add my signature to the slip too before handing it to Venera. Surprisingly, she seems very happy, "I've never met the President in my life, but now I actually have the honor of receiving His Majesty the Maou's very own signature."

"I'm counting on you, Ambassador. Ah—Also, can I ask you if we can use non-Seisakoku currency?" Just then, something in the corner of my vision moves.

"He's waving!?"

Murata, who had been lying on the floor, raises his left hand and waves it lightly. I can't help but grab someone's clothes and yell, "He's waving, he's waving! Murata, Murata--! Thank goodness, you're still alive! You still have strength! Thank goodness... Thank goodness I can see you again!"

"To think you would get so excited over such a trivial thing."

Crap, that's Adalbert's hand.

"Since he can survive all the way until just now, there's no way he'll die so easily."

"Murata's specialty is his brain, so his stamina is really bad, and it's not like he had training like you."

"In other words he's really weak... But he looked really strong at the 'World's Strongest' tournament. By the way, why isn't he with you? You two double blacks should stay together like good boys, it'd be easier to protect you that way. It's precisely because you separated that all these bothersome things happen."

"A lot of things happened to us too, what's why we came to this country separately."

To be precise, this world.

How on earth did he come here though? Without relying on my power, he came to this land far, far away from Shin Makoku all on his own. Could it be he used a third person's power? Someone I don't know brought him here?

If that's true—

"If that's so, why did they throw him into such a place...!"

Even if it was someone who brought Murata here, why did they throw him into the enemy lines alone and then wash their hands of him? That's way too cruel, I can't forgive that.

Murata raises his face that was plastered to the ground, clearing his throat to try and turn sound into words, but he fails several times until he finally manages to call my name, "Shibuya."

"I'm, here."

"Shibuya, we sure met up in a nice place."

"Please, how is this nice? This is the worst!"

"If we didn't meet here, we might have met with something even worse."

"That's true, but... Can you speak? Did your wound open again!?"

Still lying on his belly, Murata struggles to pull his right hand out from underneath him, splaying his fingers open for me to see. His arm and shoulder aren't curved at any strange angles, so it seems nothing was broken.

"My injuries aren't as bad as they seem, I wouldn't call them serious."

"What about the blood!? Has it stopped?"

"I'm fine... I'm not hurt...... Also, don't make that sound like you're on the verge of tears."

"But you look really badly injured, and you got wounds everywhere, I thought maybe you were dead...... I was worried, it'd be terrible if anything happened to you."

"Mn, I am covered in wounds, but there's nothing life-threatening, just light bruises and pulled muscles, is all."

The break in his sentence is really unnatural, making me even more uneasy. He sighs forcefully, until I feel as though I can hear his breathing. Actually, it's good that I can hear it.

"Murata?"

"Relax, I'm very much conscious. The reason I can't move now isn't because I'm injured... but because I'm tired. After all, before I came here, I underwent all

sorts of trials and tribulations. Even if I was pulled out of the tombs, I suffered quite a bit in the process..."

"I'm asking you, how did you get here?"

"Forget about that for now, on the other hand I want to ask you what on earth happened here. Ah—Really, where are my glasses?"

He reaches out his uninjured right hand, picking up his dusty, sandy glasses. But it looks to me that both the frames and lenses are beyond repair, so he tsks angrily.

""Don't worry about your glasses, I have a spare here."

"I don't know why you would have a spare, but I'll say thanks in advance, I'll be borrowing it temporarily. I've decided! Once we get back to Earth I'm switching to contacts, otherwise I just can't rest easy, since I can't see your face like this."

"Fine."

I've already personally experienced how uneasy and scary it is to have something I could see previously suddenly disappear from my vision. At first it felt like the world disappeared without a trace, but in truth nothing changed, the only one that changed is myself. It's just that it takes a rather long time to notice that.

"Relax, I'll keep talking to you, so you know that I'm right here. But you need to voice out too, okay?"

"Actually, you don't need to, talk to me. I have a lot of things to ask you, though."

"What things?"

"Tell me, what happened to you here?"

Murata ignores the sand on the ground, shaking his head from left to right as he says, "What changed in the time I've been chasing you? Have you been usurped?"

"No, I haven't been usurped—I think."

I turn back to look at Wolfram uneasily, and he nods with a perfectly solemn

expression, so it seems the Ten Aristocrats haven't abandoned me.

"If that's so, then how did he become the enemy?"

He's pointing at Josak. The man with hair the color of the setting sun stays silent, his head lowered and looking at Murata motionlessly.

My heart feels like someone's twisting it in my chest. Thinking back to those days in the endless darkness, I suddenly find it hard to breathe as my windpipe constricts.

Why is he standing on that side? Why isn't he standing by my side?

"Sorry... About that, I don't know either."

Wolfram whispers into my ear, "Could he have been controlled?" After all, Josak's loyalty is well known, no matter how lightly he treats it, everything he does is for Shin Makoku, so even if the truth is right in front of our eyes it's hard for us to believe it.

Murata doesn't notice my confusion, changing the topic immediately,

"Then what situation am I in..."

"What situation? Looks like I didn't hear the deal made just now. Don't worry, these people are just scared seeing an unfamiliar hair color, once they know you're not dangerous, they should immediately let you go."

I can't tell Murata, weakened as he is now, that he's currently a hostage. Murata clears his throat again, as though he has something to say, or maybe it's just sand or dust in his throat.

"Murata, it's okay for you to talk facing the ground, I can hear you no matter how soft your voice."

I sprawl onto the ground and plaster my right cheek and ear onto the ground, the cool touch of the sand on my skin. The desert in this country is dry and cold, as I thought.

My friend says in a voice close to me,

"Technically that's not possible, it's not like this is a paper cup telephone."

"I already said I can hear you even if you don't speak so loudly."

"Then I'll say it now, I..."

"If you tell me to leave you and escape now, I'm breaking up with you! I won't be your friend anymore!"

"Then that's troublesome—"

As I expected, he was going to say that stupid line. Murata sighs,

"Then I might as well die and get it over with."

"Don't simply talk about dying or whatnot!"

"I'm not saying it simply."

He takes a breath, and then lowers his voice,

"The truth is I have some important things to tell you secretly, but if I lower my voice you won't be able to hear me."

"Then say it in Japanese, Murata. If you use Japanese, only the two of us will understand it."

"Ah—That's right, use Japanese."

Suggesting that we use Japanese under these circumstances, gives even me a strange feeling. But I've been using English with Hazel anyway, so of course I can use our mother tongue with Murata. We are Japanese people, born and bred, after all.

"The Box in the stone room..."

Just as Murata is about to continue, a ray of light pierces through the air. The sword that comes down brushes past the tip of his nose, and embeds itself into the hard ground.

My heart nearly stops from the shock. Both of us forget to breathe, not moving a single finger.

Josak, sitting on his horse, had attacked suddenly, trying to stop Murata from talking.

"Stop!"

Just saying that requires a lot of courage.

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"Stop, Josak!"

"It's okay, Yuuri, I'm fine."
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He seems to only want to scare Murata, without actually hurting him.

Murata's voice is very calm, and our conversation switches back to the common language.

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"I'm fine."

"R-really?"
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"Really, but... I'm so tired, I want to rest a while. I'm not fainting, just taking a short nap to recover my strength."

"It's okay, go ahead and sleep, leave the rest of it to me."

By the time you wake up, we'll have gotten you back from those guys.

Having ended the conversation, I support myself with my palms on the sand and stand up, then I ask Wolfram to watch him for me, turning around purposefully. Only after taking a few steps do I realize that I'm covering my mouth with my right hand, so I immediately add my left hand too, then I leave everyone with my head lowered. I feel as though if I let go, I'll sob out loud.

Five feet away, there are two mares with docile gazes wandering about, carefree. I stumble up to them, and they look at me in unison too, before turning their gazes away indifferently. Standing in between the two horses, I reach out to touch their warm sides.

Feeling the pulse underneath the skin.

Suddenly I feel nauseous, so I can't help but crouch down between the horses. Pressure, it must be the pressure. This feeling is the same as when facing an important competition, when I'm so nervous I could puke.

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"Yuuri."
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My lowered gaze spots a pair of brown army boots, it's Conrad. Why does he always appear at the perfect timing?

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"Why... are you here..."
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He touches my hand, plastering his palm against my bent arm,

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"Because we can't be seen here."

"Can't be seen? We really can't be seen?"

"Yes."
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I grab Conrad's right shoulder, putting my head on his chest, but I don't allow myself to plaster my face there.

I clench my teeth and try to stop my body from shaking, forcefully steadying my feet. It feels as though a large hole has opened up under my feet, and I'm about to fall into an abyss whole. I take a deep breath so hard my lungs hurt, and then exhale loudly. I even take care not to increase my breathing at all times.

Hold back—This is my body, my emotions, I should be able to hold them back.

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"Are you okay?"
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"I'm fine... The one suffering isn't me, it's Murata."

Conrad touches my lips with his thumb, the place he touches hurts a little.

"Your lip is cracked."

There's the taste of blood too, it's not a superficial wound.

He pauses for quite some time before speaking again,

"I told Josak... Gurrier before, that if anything were to endanger you..."

"That's enough!"

"At that time I would personally..."

"Don't say anymore! Now isn't the time to say those things, for all we know he's been controlled, and we don't know how he survived either! Maybe he's just moving because of Yelshi's houjutsu, when in fact he's long..."

My vision goes suddenly black, and I feel dizzy too, so I grab onto his clothes with my fingers hurriedly. In order to support my body, Conrad hugs me tightly. His hair and face just manage to touch my ear.



He calls my name, and says in a tone as though comforting a child, "I'm sorry, I didn't say anything."

"Conrad?"

"I'm the one who made you so upset."

The arms holding me press hard and hurt my back.

"Not only did I make you worry, I even show up in the enemy's uniform, I'm the one who made your feelings so complicated."

So he's repenting.

It's all because of that adult's pride, that's why it hard to lower his head obediently and admit his mistakes, that's why he never said it, until a moment like this comes and he can toss away his inhibitions, speaking out loudly.

"I made you suffer."

"That's right."

I assume he's crying, so I move the hand on his shoulder to lightly surround his neck, "You disappeared from in front of my eyes without a word, making me worry like hell and then you show up in a Shimaron uniform instead. At first I thought you would return to my side, but then you actually tell me I'm not the best king."

"Yuuri."

"And I worked so hard too, in order to make you recognize me as a good king, hoping you would feel I'm special."

"You were, from the start."

His voice reaches my ear, his breath mingling with the dry air and blowing into my heart.

"From the start, you were already a good king."

"In that case why didn't you say so? I'm not a kid anymore, if you just tell me the reason properly, I'll understand. If you had just explained things clearly, I would have watched you leave with a smile."

"I went to sow seeds."

"Sow seeds?"

I repeat his words like an idiot, not understanding a thing.

"That's right, just like what Venera is doing."

The mares neigh at that moment, informing us of a change in our surroundings. Maybe Venera is convincing the equestrian people to make a move.

"Let's go back."

I sigh deeply, patting Conrad's shoulder. If it weren't for this chance today, I really don't know how long I'd have to wait for him to confess everything.

"The sun is setting, now isn't the time to be dejected. We need to get the hostage back."

"Yeah."

The protector's warmth leaves me, making me feel in that instant like an uneasy chick left in the nest. But I already said so just now, I'm no longer a child, I have to work hard to become a good king.

In that case, I must first do what needs to be done.

No matter how much I want to close my eyes and run away, I still have to face reality. My vision is back, and this is what my eyes are for.

"Conrad."

He replies with a nod.

"Can I make everything back to normal again?"

"Of course you can." We're walking back to where our companions are, step by step. Wolfram, Hazel and Adalbert are staring at me, if only my footsteps were more stable than when we came.

Before walking into the circle they made, I raise up my right hand first. This gesture means I want to say something, while at the same time stopping the others from moving.

"I'm sure you all saw that, the sword was right in front of Murata's nose."

All three of them reply "that's right" in their respective voices.

"To be honest, I was scared to death then."

"Me too."

"Even if those guys seem to be indifferent to everything and take everything casually, the truth is they have a hostage in their hands. If it's a simple plan like riding a horse to grab Murata back, the chances are it won't be that easy to rescue him."

"Maybe. But I'm of the same opinion, so it looks like there's a need to come up with another plan."

"But even if there's another plan, there's a limit to how effective it'll be, right?"

That's right, there is indeed a limit.

So I stand with my legs slightly apart, and say forcefully,

"Then let's agree to exchange hostages."

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Not long ago, Sizemore and Dacascos had a short tour of the ancient tombs.

"I'm not complaining or anything, it's just that this team seems a little too basic."

Maybe it's just him, but it feels as though the horse he's riding on isn't very motivated either.

"We can't help it—The moment we discover the other search teams, we have to take them to His Majesty as soon as possible."

The men were left behind at the water source to rebuild the village, while they chased His Majesty's group from the back, and finally caught up with Yuuri and co after experiencing those impactful events. As soon as they rendezvoused, though, they were sent on this mission.

Their mission is to leave the front that's currently in stalemate, and look for the other search teams that separated after landing in Seisakoku. If they found the others nearby, they were to lead them to the battlefield as quickly as possible.

In others words, they're in charge of reception.

Shin Makoku's highest commander Yuuri nods as he says,

"That's right, it's an SOS."

"Huh? Does milord mean the sisters that only get along with the Seisakoku?"

"No, I'm talking about a help signal you send out when in distress. When you're stranded on an uninhibited island, you should find a way to tell the ships or planes in the distance where you are, right? That's why you use a smoke signal or a mirror to reflect light and ask for help."

With that Dacascos finally understood, that His Majesty's target was his head.

That's why bright-headed (even though they're completely reluctant about it)

Dacascos and Sizemore temporarily left their king's side, setting out on a journey to lead their reinforcements here.

"Actually, His Majesty really didn't need to be subtle about it, he could have just said our shiny heads would help in the desert, and we would have immediately accepted the mission..."

"Mn, this should be a sign of His Majesty's compassion. After all, when he saw the thinning hair on my head, he even praised me by saying I'm like a baby bird, calling me very cute."

But their worth as signal lights is quickly diminishing, from the moment the sun sets completely to the time when the moon rises into the sky, they are completely useless. Because their heads can only reflect the light, and not emit their own light like stars.

"We have to return to them quickly once the sun sets, after all it's better to have more fighting power. Even though I, Sizemore, am better at naval battles, but I still won't lose to a regular soldier on the land, even unarmed I can take on two or three enemies. I won't let anyone make fun of me by calling me a tuna out of water!"

"Of course. Although I'm not that experienced in battle, running errands is my main job. I can help everyone tidy up bones, harvest flesh pieces. If I could bring a sample of the living dead back, Lady Anissina would definitely praise me!"

Rather than running errands, that's bordering into scientific search.

"So do we go back now? Or continue on His Majesty's important mission? It's so hard to choose between the two."

"Mn, that's right. We still have important business at hand, so we must make a decision before nightfall."

But to the one people call 'Master of the Seas' as well as 'the Scary Monk on the Sea'—Captain Sizemore, this dry land really is torture.

"Just the issue of my dry skin alone seems unresolvable, I'll probably never live in the desert until the day I die."

"Oh~~ That's right, that's right, you can use this if your skin is dry. I bought this

at the port on the way here when I found out we were going to the desert. Use this, moisturizer! It's a new item from the Queen's Inventions, though it's meant for the ladies."

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"Oh, thanks a lot."
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Sizemore accepts Dacascos' bottle, dripping a few drops onto his hand and rubbing them onto his face, directly connected to his scalp, without checking the color and smell first. For some reason, the spots covered in the medicine burn painfully, and immediately turn red and swollen.

Sizemore screams in a way completely unlike himself, and then grabs a stunned Dacascos by the collar,

"W-w-what is this!? Is this really moisturizer!?"

"That's what it says on the label."

"Something so dangerous technically shouldn't be circulating on the market..."

Anything invented by Lady von Karbelnikoff "Mad Scientist" Anissina, has an eighty per cent chance of being dangerous. But regular consumers don't know that, and buy her failed products happily. Even though the final product is very safe, the truth is the ones they bought are all failed products. Those passionate devotees are really very scary.

Sizemore also believed in its quality because of Her Majesty the Queen's guarantee. That's why he can't believe he's suffering like this, and hurriedly checks the bottom of the bottle. There is indeed the name of the producer there, written in a bright red color that brings to mind the founder's hair, "The Quin's Invention".

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"Quin...?"[1]
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So it's a fake.

"W-what do we do now, Dacascos!?"

"C-c-c-calm down, Captain! You just went a bit red, changing from the monk on the sea to the lama on the sea, that's all!"

[&]quot;Here you go."

"The lama on the sea--!?"

"That's right, the lama on the sea. Its position on the sea chart is higher than the monk. That's wonderful—Lord Captain, this is an evolution, y'know--!"

"Don't try to get away with it!"

"Just relax, Lord Captain, I also have here a folk remedy for healing coarse skin."

Dacascos carefully takes out a fingernail-sized stone that shines with a brown glow from his pocket.

"What is that? A bone?"

"It's a tooth."

"Dacascos, don't tell me you're only now becoming an adult?"

"No, this isn't my tooth, I picked it up on the ship. My old mother back home told me, if your skin suddenly becomes coarse, you may be able to heal it by wishing on a tooth you found by accident. This is Lilit Latchie Nanata Micotan's family remedy, passed down the generations."

Putting aside the fact that it 'may be able to heal', Dacascos' habit of collecting things came from his mother after all. And then he puts his mouth close to the tooth he picked up, chanting what sounds like a spell,

"Now I pray to the fairies in the springs of paradise, heal the Captain's coarse skin! Heal the Captain's coarse skin!"

"Dacascos..."

Although the two of them were thrown together as master and follower abruptly for a last minute job, Sizemore didn't think Dacascos would work so hard for him, and can't help but be deeply touched.

"But Dacascos, what does a tooth found by accident have to do with coarse skin?"

"Heal the Captain's coarse skin... Because of that, Captain! Heal the Captain's coarse skin... After all, when you find a tooth by accident, you can't help but say, 'Eh, it's a tooth... eh, it's a tooth... coarse skin... coarse skin." [2]

"Mn~~? Eh, it's a tooth... eh, it's a tooth... coarse skin... coarse skin..."

A chill suddenly rises in Sizemore's chest.

Before the wish to the fairies is transmitted, his previously scalding face has already cooled down drastically.

But it seems that wish didn't reach the paradise where the tooth fairies reside, but a completely different place.

The experiment lab from hell where the devils reside.

Lady von Karbelnikoff Anissina is busy as a bee in the lab in the middle of the night, while Greta sings a song behind her.

"Oh dear, what an unfamiliar song."

"Yuuri taught it to me. It's called 'To Steal and Pick Up', apparently it's very popular among children."

Even though the lyrics may not be accurate, but seeing the little girl sing happily with her hands on the table, nobody would say anything to break the atmosphere. As for Anissina, who has no interest whatsoever in famous songs from a different world, she makes some black tea for the girl and herself instead.

"Greta is staying up a lot recently, huh."

"Anissina's been staying up for many days in a row—"

"It's okay for me, the Poison Lady has a different biological clock from regular people. Just like meat and vegetables, when night and day all feel like day. For more details, please read 'Oh Night Fog, The Poison Lady Again Tonight', expected to be published the year after the next."

"Although I don't really get it, but wow--!"

No matter how evil the villain is, they wouldn't want to do anything bad once they're liked by a child. Even Lady von Karbelnikoff Anissina, with scary names like the Red Devil or the Impenetrable Surveillance Monitor, can't help but consider making useful things instead, so close so close.

"Speaking of which, what do you plan on doing with those puzzle bones? Don't

tell me you want to make a trap house at a 1000:1 scale?"

"No."

There's a set of 'Happy-Happy Bone Puzzles', adapted from 'Oh! Stack the Bones High', on the table in front of Greta. That is indeed a toy she likes, but she's carrying it around with her not because she wants to play with it.

"I was wondering if we'd hear any more information from it."

"Oh-"

As a human girl, Greta experienced hearing bone-statics for the first time a few days ago. What His Majesty Yuuri calls bone-statics, is actually an ability the kotsuhizoku and kotsuchizoku use to communicate and transmit messages between themselves. There are many things people still don't know about their biology, and bone-statics are just one part of it. What is the logic and the principles behind the transmission? How large is the area of reception? Such questions are innumerable.

But the reality is that they can communicate through the bones, and the bones also transmit some sort of signal.

No one knows if it's a coincidence or her natural-born ability, but Greta can actually hear those signals. When she was playing with the Happy-Happy Puzzle Bones, she heard the bone-static transmission from a veteran grass kotsuchizoku (those kotsuchizoku who leave Shin Makoku on spy missions and lie on foreign land have the word 'grass' added in front).

From then on, this heap of Happy-Happy Bone Puzzles never left Greta's side.

Greta even bathes and sleeps with these puzzle bones, kept in a white pot and wooden box. If Yuuri saw this after coming back, he would definitely sob, "Let them rest in peace." After all, this is way too unlucky to the Japanese.

Tonight, the girl is still observing Anissina's poison experiments as she pours the bones onto the table.

The scallop-shaped bone piece she heard the signal from a few days ago is the closest to her, but even if she plasters it to her left ear, all she can hear is the background noise from a cemetery.

Greta taps on the bone piece with her index finger while staring at Anissina's hands—her left hand is bringing the black tea to her lips for a sip while her right hand is busy mixing medicines. Normal people would just praise her for her dexterity, but to Greta, who respects anything and everything the Poison Lady does, her graceful, dignified, delicate yet brave actions merit more than even a hundred praises turned to a thousand.

To this day, the girl still can't decide on her future target.

Although there are two charismatic living examples for her to follow, she's very conflicted over who she should recognize as her master. Should she be the Poison Lady? Or the Demon Sergeant? It's because these two paths are both cool yet beautiful, they're both wonderful even if they're completely different.

Greta pouts, mimicking Lord Weller's personal ducky while she continues knocking on the scallop-shaped puzzle bone. Just then, she hears something that's neither the 'To Steal and Pick Up' she's humming nor the sound of dirt-colored poison boiling.

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"Mn?"

It's like a song or a cry, or more like a spell.

"Mn?"
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The girl picks up the bone piece and puts it by her little ear. It's true, there really is the sound of someone talking from this puzzle bone.

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"Anissina!"

"What's the matter?"

"It's bone-statics again!"
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Hearing Greta's words, the Poison Lady also puts the bone piece offered to her to her ear. But all she hears are groans like 'woo—woo—' and the sound of wind in the cemetery.

The mad scientist immediately rushes to the room next door, taking out a large metal object about the size of a carriage wheel.

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"Is that a pot?"
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"No, this is a new and improved version of the high performance receptor 'BS-kun', the super high performance receptor 'BS-kun, Present!'. It won't rust even if the floor is covered with snails and centipedes, and can correspond with digital ground waves. Even though it's this price and this size, there's even an intelligent response function. Once we connect this to the bone piece... Jack, this is amazing!"[3]

The voices from the bone piece becomes clearer, and there's a man's aside, "More and more things are corresponding with digital ground waves these days."

"Oh dear, Kusanagi spoke. I forgot that I once installed an immediate voice broadcast through digital ground waves. Right now I just have to temporarily turn it off..."

Suddenly Anissina kicks the 'BS-kun, Present!' hard. The voice broadcast disappears immediately, returning to something like the sound of the wind in a cemetery, only this time there are voices mixed in as well, and so the two of them perk up their ears to listen.

Heal... tain's coarse... skin...

The spell, repeated over and over again, becomes clearer and clearer, the only problem is with the contents of what they're hearing. Not only are the contents unlucky, they're also really strange.

"Meet coarse skin—"

"No one would want to meet that, right?"

Greta's expression is all tense too.

The sounds keep on coming as they clear up, and it sounds like two travelers. Unlike last time, this time the kotsuchizoku aren't just reciting poetry to themselves, receiving the conversation nearby instead.

"Meet coarse skin—meet coarse skin—"

"But Dacascos, can this folk remedy really heal coarse skin? I feel the reason behind it should be this item from the Quin's Invention."

The Poison Lady and Greta can't help but join in their conversation,

"The Quin's Inventions!?"

"Even if you meet coarse skin, it can't be healed, y'know!?"

"Wait a sec, you kamaitachi over there! No, I mean, you two!"

Seeing Gwendal barge in and squeeze in between the two of them, the girls are a little miffed. This is a late night experiment limited to girls only, it's rather clueless for a man to run in here at a time like this. Even though Lord von Voltaire is a little scare, he continues anyway,

"That's not what's you should be focusing on right now!"

"Because this bone piece mentioned the Quin's Inventions, y'know!? That must be something a man made! It must be a man!"

"Really, it doesn't matter if it's the Quin or the Niuq! Didn't you hear that? Just now, from this piece of bone, I really heard the word 'Dacascos'!"

If the person he's talking to was his subordinate, he would definitely have grabbed their chest and yelled, "You useless thing!" But that person now is Anissina, so he really can't do something so terrifying.

"Dacascos is Günter's subordinate, if we heard his name, that means this bone piece is receiving a conversation between the search team members! There could be other important intel, listen carefully, the two of you!"

And so the three of them stand in a line in front of 'BS-kun, Present!', perking up their ears and listening intently to the conversation.

"Ah, Captain! It seems to be slightly better, the red swelling is slowly fading!"

"Really? But rather than the tooth fairy's blessing, I think it's more likely because of that cold joke just now."

Tooth fairy? The three eavesdropping on the conversation exchange glances. From the way Dacascos calls him 'Captain', the person talking to him should be Sizemore. To think that burly Master of the Seas is actually a devotee of the tooth fairy.

"You misunderstood, that wasn't a cold joke. Thank goodness we believe in the tooth fairies, and pray so devoutly—Heal the Captain's coarse skin—"

"But it's so rare for us to come looking for the other search times, and yet we haven't found a trace of them at all. The way this is going, I bet we won't have any results by nightfall. Why don't we just end the mission here, isn't it better to return to His Majesty's side?"

"That's right—Although there's His Excellency Wolfram and His Excellency Conrad, as well as that Grantz with him, it's still better to have an extra pair of hands."

"Mn."

That means Wolfram has successfully rendezvoused with them—the oldest son heaves a sigh of relief, thinking, 'Thank goodness.'

But how did Conrad end up operating together with His Majesty as though it's only natural? No, because that little brother couldn't possibly betray His Majesty for real, so it's understandable that he would support the monarch secretly. Judging from his position, though, he should be a member of Dai Shimaron, is it really okay for him to join the Maou's forces now?

"His Excellency Conrad has to protect that king called Saralegui at the same time, too, the poor thing. I think it wouldn't be enough even if he had three heads and six arms."

"Hahaha, where would he get so many arms—"

I see, that's how it is.

The king of Shin Makoku and the boy king of Shou Shimaron have the same interests right now, so as the ambassador of Dai Shimaron, he has to protect both of them at the same time.

Gwendal hmphs with displeasure, while Anissina tsks discontentedly as well. Greta is grinning from ear to eat, because it's been a long time since she heard her favorite Lord Weller's name.

"But that person called Hazel seems rather reliable."

"Oh~~ You mean Venera? That's true."

"On the surface she looks like she's from the same generation as my mother, but she's sprightly for her age, not only are her movements agile, she's decisive when they stumble into incidents as well. As expected of the leader who led all those slaves to oppose the Seisakoku emperor, she's really worthy of respect~~"

Thank goodness that Dacascos is here, seeing as he's so fond of narrating the current situation.

Deducing from their conversation, His Majesty Yuuri should now be moving with the forces opposing the emperor of Seisakoku, looks like he interfered into something bothersome again. Gwendal mutters in a low voice, "That's a regular occurance."

"By the way— Gwendal, what are those pajamas you're wearing?"

Lord von Voltaire, sighing with his fingers on his brow, only remembers what he's wearing when Anissina mentions it.

On top of the long pale yellow nightgown, there are even five fried egg buttons. The indoor slippers he's wearing are pale pink bunnies with eyes and ears sewn on. He seems to have gone to bed early, because there's even a nightcap with tassels on his head.

The biggest problem isn't his cute pajamas.

"There's even an animal in your stomach!"

His Excellency Lord von Voltaire Gwendal's nightgown has a pouch, and a little animal pokes its head out from inside. Those long ears, matched with those big brown eyes, are really very cute. When its gazes meet with Greta's and Anissina's, it ducks back into the pouch bashfully.

Has this man finally started rearing marsupials?

"Mn, this? This is a possum, Hide-in-Tummy Baby... No no no, I was worried it was unhealthy to sleep with the bed as cold as it is, so I rear it to stay warm."

"But it's so rare, and so cute—"

Greta and the baby possum stare at each other, and it's love at first sight for her. Although she's tends to prefer rare animals, she also like cute ones.

"These pajamas with a pouch are also really cute."

"Do you think so? Then after a few days I'll make one set for you to put on your

dolls."

"Hidey's parents aren't suspicious diplomats, are they?"

"It's called Hide-in-Tummy Baby! It's an orphan, abandoned by its parents."

Only the baby possum's ears and eyes are poking out. Since it was simply too cute, Greta can't help but cheer out loud.

Watching them, Anissina leaves the receptor with a smile, turning around to investigate documents about the habits of marsupials and whether or not they're poisonous. Gwendal also reaches his slender long finger into his pouch, rubbing Hide-in-Tummy Baby's back.

Just then, they hear a terrifying fact. Dacascos' one line freezes the air in the room in an instant.

"But I really got a shock, seeing Gurrier show up on the enemy side—"

"What did he say?"

The truth is, Gwendal didn't plan to speak.

Be it as a warrior or an administrator, Lord von Voltaire could face an emergency at any time. People in high positions must maintain their composure, and must never let their political opponents find any weak spots. Even he regards himself as good at controlling his emotions.

He doesn't realize that he spoke, but the people beside him understand why he would put his confusion to words.

Because Dacascos' words are just that surprising.

"I really don't understand how it turned out that way, I thought Gurrier would never turn traitor."

"Mn, and he's even holding His Eminence hostage. A scene like that is too much even for a man like me, a veteran trained on the sea."

"Gwendal, where are you going in the middle of the night?"

Anissina doesn't just watch and let Lord von Voltaire leave the room after hearing that conversation.

"I want to set sail to search for His Majesty Yuuri."

"Didn't you send out search ships a few days ago?"

"The situation now has changed, I want to increase the manpower. I plan on taking a high-speed boat myself and catching up with the team we sent earlier."

"Wolfram and Günter have already gone along, and now you want to go too?"

"Anissina, you should understand what this situation is, right!?"

Gwendal turns around, gripping his fists agitatedly. The possum, frightened by his tone, quickly jumps out of the pouch and escapes to a corner of the room.



"It looks like Conrad is by His Majesty's side, well, that's okay, I could even say that's good news. But once we heard that His Eminence has been taken hostage, and one of country's finest soldiers Gurrier has gone to the enemy side, that's not a normal situation anymore. It counts as an emergency, so it's only natural

to send more forces there!"

"I'm not berating your judgment."

Lady von Karbelnikoff leaves the receptor, drinking her cold black tea calmly,

"I'm asking about this country. If both Lord von Christ and yourself are away, who's to protect this country? Don't tell me you want to ask the Bielefeld bunch? Or that Stoffel you hate the most?"

"Don't joke with that!"

Her words bring back nightmarish memories, and Gwendal's frown deepens. In order to cut down that man's position, he put so much time and effort into it, he sacrificed so much. That is the person Gwendal would die rather than admit he's related to.

"Then what do you plan to do? His Majesty left a heavy responsibility on your shoulders."

"I-in that case..."

He grabs the black tea from the experiment table and takes a drink without thinking whose cup that is, and the stone that seemed to be stuck in his throat loosens considerably.

"I-I'll hand it to you."

"Me?"

Lady von Karbelnikoff raises her eyebrows slightly, tilting her head and swinging her flaming red hair,

"Our clan is only good with business, and I personally am only interested in majutsu and poison studies and literature and increasing women's social standing and increasing the quality of daily life and martial arts fighting and observing Lord von Voltaire, yet you want to trust the country to me?"

"That's right."

"I really don't understand, I know what my abilities are, but I still didn't expect you to make such a decision."

"I trust in your abilities."

Anissina tilts her head again as she muses, tapping the kettle of poison lightly with her fingernail, trimmed short for her experiments, as though hastening Gwendal to continue.

"I trust in your love and loyalty towards Shin Makoku."

After a long, silent contemplation, Her Excellency Lady von Karbelnikoff Anissina finally nods,

"Alright."

"Thank you very much."

"I should be the one thanking you."

Lord von Voltaire has already walked briskly out of the room, without hearing her out. Left alone in the experiment lab, an excitement she hasn't felt these past few years rises in Anissina's chest, and she relaxes her tightly-crossed fingers.

The new product, 'BS-kun, Present!' continues to receive bone-statics, but there's no one left listening in this room.

"That's strange—Captain, where on earth did we come from, and where are we going?"

"Oh, that's a very philosophical question. I didn't expect you to be this pretentious."

"You're misunderstanding, it's not what you think. See, the sky is already dark, we can't see our targets regardless of whether we want to move forward or trace our steps back."

"...Are we lost? Does this mean we're lost in the desert!?"

If you're lost in the desert, all you have to do is look up and find the right direction. Anissina accidentally overhears their conversation as she's flipping through a gentleman's manual, and murmurs to herself, "Men of the sea couldn't possibly not know that!"

Even if you lose your way on the sea or in the desert, it'll be fine as long as you raise you head and look at the sky. The stars shining down on everyone will definitely have a fixed position, emitting a fixed light.

Because the friend that she liked, used to say that often.

Not long later, she glances towards the furry little animal curled up in the corner of the room near the window, and immediately walks to it and picks the baby possum up. After examining its stomach, she smiles in satisfaction!

"Oh dear oh dear, the future sure is exciting."

It's female.

Lord von Voltaire Gwendal prepares everything at an unprecedented speed and jumps onto the boat headed for the port. During this season, it may be faster to go down the river currents than riding a horse.

It's only halfway through the journey that he realizes he's gripping a Happy-Happy Bone Puzzle piece in his hand tightly.

"If I can use this thing properly, it should become a somewhat convenient means of communication."

Regrettably the bone-statics seem to work only at specific times and places, and he won't get anything at all if he's unlucky. That feeling is like a broadcast show from far away that you can only hear in the middle of the night.

Gwendal puts the bone piece in his pocket, and only then does he jump in shock—To think he actually forgot to change out of his pajamas.

But the next second he discovers another terrifying fact, and can't help but hold his head in vexation. He's always been calm and steady, but now he can't help but yell out loud, and even wants to jump into the river.

The living thing in his pajama pouch isn't an abandoned animal with doleful eyes, but a human girl.

Crap! The soldiers had really strange expressions just now when he was boarding the boat, could this be the reason why? Most of the soldiers don't dare to look directly, there are even some who were about to speak then stopped. If Greta was hiding in the pouch then, it's no wonder his subordinates acted so strangely.

Although many of the young soldiers were yelling in their hearts, "This is too

farfetched, isn't it!?", the only one who seemed completely oblivious to it was Gwendal. Because he always mistook the heavy feeling in his stomach for the possum, Hide-in-Tummy Baby.

The girl crawls out of his pouch and crouches in front of him, so by now it won't help even if you were to say 'there's way too big a difference in the weight'.

Gwendal sags his shoulders dejectedly,

"Greta... Why are you here?"

"Greta is really worried about everyone too!"

"So you're using your skills as Trap Lady?"

"I may be the Trap Lady, but this is what Gisela taught me."

"Gisela taught you how to stowaway?"

But openly entering an adult's pouch and then boarding the boat without a worry while everyone is aware, isn't really called stowing away, is it? However, Greta explains as she puts on her shoes,

"Not that, I meant switching with stone weights."

"What?"

"Switching with stone weights! Apparently a long time ago in a warzone, there would be many dangerous traps buried underground. Your leg would be clamped horribly once you step on it, so you must light~ switch with things of the same weight to escape."

So it's trap dismantlement.

"That's what Gisela told me, she said she tried quite a few times too. The secret in it is to put the same weight's worth in mud or stones, and it's a job that puts your life on the line. This story's really awesome, right?"

"I think little children shouldn't know things like that... Anyway you got me."

"Yayy—Can Greta become a worthy Demon Sergeant--?"

"Mn, you can definitely become a worthy Demon Sergeant... Wait, a worthy Demon Sergeant? Greta wants to become a sergeant when you grow up?"

And a Demon Sergeant, too...

"That's right, recently Yuuri wanted me to reconsider my future, he said I can be whatever I want, but the only thing is I must give up becoming Poison Lady. So I was thinking, it should be pretty nice to become a Demon Sergeant—"

Faced with the girl who has already decided her future goal at ten years old, all the blood drains out of Gwendal's face.

"I-isn't there anything else you want to become? Such as a bride, or a princess etcetera."

"Anissina once said, only 'weak' men like Gurrier..."

Greta doesn't continue, feeling as though it's best not to mention Josak. That isn't a problem children can interfere with— The young girl who has experienced cruel things, stops talking as soon as she understood that fact.

Instead, she reaches out her slender arms towards his tall figure. Gwendal bends down, so Greta's arms can hook around his neck.

"Don't worry, Gwendal, it'll definitely be fine."

"You're right..."

The little boat carries the girl and the adult, heading down the shortest path to the navy port.

But there are also people in this world suffering from a lack of means of communication and transportation.

In a port hospital in a certain country, the nurses from the day and night shifts are exchanging their positions.

"Oh right oh right, be careful of the patient in room one oh eight."

"Oh dear, wasn't he in the regular ward yesterday? Did something happen?"

The lady nurse getting ready to go home puts her hand to her mouth and whispers,

"Apparently he pulled out his own hair, and then used that hair to knit things."

"Goodness, then he really is slightly sick."

"Exactly, when the head of department came to stop him, he even said, 'As soon as I finish knitting this, I can go to a foreign country as I wish!"

"Eh, does he want to go vacationing overseas that badly?"

"Who knows? We tried to stop him quite a few times, too, there's already a coin-sized round bald patch on his head, too. The patients around him all found him disgusting, that's why we moved him to the muscle ward."

"I see."

The young male therapist taking the night shift is just flexing his biceps, it's as though they can hear the sound of muscles vibrating.

"If he does anything dangerous, the muscle therapist would stop him with his body, huh?"

"Of course, leave everything to the muscle therapist!"

The therapist winks, patting his thick arm bound in leather belts. As expected, he puts one's heart to ease.

"Besides, wasn't that person transported here directly by boat because he used up all his stamina?"

"Exactly, huh."

"Then he must be some stowaway, who was chased out in this roundabout way after he was discovered. But he looks out through the window and into the distance, he's always muttering, 'Today, His Majesty's white pigeon would definitely...', y'know."

"Oh dear, who's this His Majesty he's talking about?"

The nurse who just ended her shift lowers her voice,

"It must be his delusions!"

The night shift muscle therapist grips his hands tightly, resting his chin on his hands,

"How scary~~!"

"That patient has always been hugging the pouch made from his own hair tightly, and keeps on waiting for a white pigeon that will never come."

"Is that so... And he's so pretty too, how simply pitiful."

But their topic of concern immediately leaves the special patient, moving on to discussing where they'd go for their next vacation. "Oh yeah, speaking of overseas vacations, do you want to go to Hildyard next? I'm saving up money to 'meet the king', y'know!"

This is the story of the man, Lord von Christ Günter in a foreign port city. Come, pigeon, fly here quickly!

- 1. ____ In Chinese it's from 女王 (female king = queen) to 女玉,玉 meaning jade XD
- 2.

 Apparently 'Eh, it's a tooth' sounds like 'coarse skin' in Japanese... orz
- 3. <u>↑</u> Apparently it's a line from Days of Our Lives, a long-running American soap. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Days of Our Lives)
- 4. <u>↑</u> It's a famous Japanese yokai, but I have no idea what the relevance is here... (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamaitachi)
- 5. <u>↑</u> I don't know how the hell to translate this anymore, basically it's 女玉 vs 玉女. Funnily, 玉女 (jade woman) makes more sense...

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Someone said once, that there's no such thing as an endless night in this world.

Even so, is there really no way to prevent the sun from setting in the west? But even as I mutter that wish, unattainable from neither the scientific nor the astronomical point of view, to myself, the evening sun in Seisakoku continues to fall cruelly.

The red sun sinks into the horizon on the left, even further away than the tombs. The orange-red sky is almost all gone, darkness rushing in from all directions.

The time is up.

I stand in front of Wolfram, Conrad, Hazel and Adalbert, presenting my strategy after some tweaks—although I feel as though it got worse after the tweaking.

I didn't let Saralegui join the meeting. He's been staring at the direction Yelshi is, kicking the sand underneath his feet non-stop. Are you a kid?

"This isn't a hostage exchange, but taking turns being the hostage. I've decided to become the hostage on my own will."

I'd long expected to hear protests, so before Wolfram says anything, I announce my reasons, "I'm physically stronger, so I'll be easier to rescue than Murata, who can't move. At the very least I can still move on my feet, and I don't have to worry about being trampled by hoofs either. As long as the hostage is unharmed, he'd also be more likely to grab a chance and get away on his own."

"I see, it makes sense."

I didn't expect Wolfram to nod twice, accepting my rookie opinion.

"It makes sense, huh? If I could phrase it better, not only would I be able to

fight for enough time, I might even be able to beg forgiveness by telling bedtime stories."

"How amazing, Your Majesty, you might even buy us a thousand and one nights' worth of time if all goes well."

Hazel laughs, and then returns to that expression of a grandma worried about her grandkid,

"In that case, it won't change the risk to the hostage character, do PRINCE and Lord Weller really not mind? You guys are His Majesty's bodyguards, right? How could you let your monarch face such danger?"

"I only listen to the king."

Wolfram accepts my opinion obediently this time too.

Lord Weller stays silent, musing. After all he is the ambassador from Dai Shimaron, so he has to find a way to compromise without harming the country's benefits. But if his previous words weren't a lie, he would probably take the mazoku's opinions into account too.

Adalbert takes a torch from the equestrian people, sticking it into the fire desperately. He doesn't seem to have the slightest bit of interest in the hostage exchange.

Hazel looks around her, saying in a slightly deeper tone,

"Since he himself said so, I'm fine with it as well."

"But of course, I don't plan to stay in their hands."

In order to dispel her unease, I add,

"Please rendezvous with the other search teams, prepare everything and then return to rescue me. I won't say something like an elementary school student such as 'it's embarrassing to be rescued', so please, you must save me... and that one."

In front of my chin, Saralegui is still kicking sand. Even though Ajira and his cousin walk past him carrying dried grass, he has absolutely no intention of helping.

"If you have time, help collect firewood. If we don't have a fire, everything else is forfeit."

This isn't the city center with neon lights and flashing traffic lights, but a desert where there isn't even a house's lamps. Once the night has completely fallen, it'll be totally pitch black. Even if we don't have a campfire for roasting marshmallows, we still really need a fire and torches for illumination.

Besides that the temperature will also drop drastically too—I already started rubbing my hands together, the weather already feels rather cold.

On the other hand, forget campfires, the enemy camp hasn't even lit torches. Although there's a tiny light in the middle of the camp where Yelshi is, there isn't a shred of light amongst the other soldiers.

They're standing under the moonlight without a worry, not giving two hoots about us, searching for precious fire fuel everywhere.

Thinking about it, most of them are corpses, so they won't worry about what happens when the night gets too dark to see in, they can't see anything to start with. Forget their eyes or corneas, even their eyeballs would have more or less fallen out by now.

"They won't be bothered even without light, huh?"

Covered from head to toe in sand, I approach Saralegui and say,

"That's enough, Sara, stop throwing your tantrums, stop acting like my dog at home."

"Mind your own business."

"Where did that 'natural-born king' attitude of yours fly off to?"

"That's why I'm throwing a tantrum. Because in a moment, I'll become a hostage not of my own volition, but because someone else made the decision on their own."

"Like I said, that's just a temporary plan. To save Murata, this is the best method—it's the best method for you, too. Didn't I said we'd come back alive?"

Sara just looks at me wordlessly.

"But we need time, we have to wait for the reinforcements, so we can gather enough firepower. That's why now we need to buy time, you got it? Haven't you been king of a large country for two years now? Aren't you more capable than me, didn't you create a lot more strategies than I have?"

"But even if I create a strategy now, I don't have soldiers to obey me."

"Sara..."

"Looks like I'll have to give up my own free will, and exchange hostages together with you. I'm asking you, if we were imprisoned by Yelshi, what do you think will happen?"

"Hmm..."

I expect that hostilities would start again within a day and a night, so all I can imagine a desert journey surrounded by zombies, but Saralegui suggests a surprising long-term development,

"He would definitely force us to sign a contract that's beneficial to Seisakoku, and then keep us under house arrest after his plan succeeds, where he'll force feed delicious food to us, and make us fat as pigs."

"The first half is what you did before."

I'm about to say 'you brothers are just the same' when I remember Yelshi's true thoughts that had been transmitted into my brain. Sara, maybe we won't be forced to sign a contract. It's more direct to use the hostages and control the other countries as he likes, that's what Yelshi is really thinking.

In that case, the younger brother's opinion is more flexible. As for Saralegui, who wants to do everything the official way, he should be the common sense type.

"And then he'll bring me, all fat and ugly, to show the public. Goodness, everyone will be so completely disappointed, complaining about how the beautiful king of the past is now ugly as a toad."

"How long do you think we'll be held under house arrest? And your imagination is way too wild. How about this, while we're hostages, why don't you work out with me? Burn off the calories we eat with push-ups and frog

jumps, then when we're released, you'll have become a muscleman. Once you have the ideal body, your people would love you more too."

"I hate working out."

Discovered, an enemy of exercise!

"Then how about this, we'll send a few people with fast horses to the port while we're preparing, and they can return to Shou Shimaron then report that the king is trouble? That way, there would be many soldiers who obey your orders rushing here."

"Do you know how much time that will take? And you probably haven't forgotten how hard it is to enter and leave Seisakoku, right? Without passing through those nightmarish seas, there's no way the orders would reach Shou Shimaron."

"Ah-"

I'd better not tell him there's a route that circles the continent and avoids those seas, just take it as an advantageous piece of information specific to mazoku.

Saralegui harrumphs with his nose, pouting like a pissed-off child,

"There's no other way."

I've always been envious of him. Although he's really young, but be it his manner of speaking, acting or thinking, he's always very kingly, and sometimes I'm rather fond of his arrogance too. I believed deeply that as long as I did my best to survive, and receive all the proper education, even a regular rough guy would be able to become an impressive boy king like him.

But since we came here, I kept away those envious thoughts. Now, instead, I feel really sad.

Saralegui's unrelenting gaze sparkles gold underneath the weak rays of light, but he's scared, scared that he would soon be controlled by the enemy. Even if it's only temporary, he's scared that the world won't turn according to his will—because in the past, his world always revolved around him.

People who have never tasted failure sure are unfortunate.

To me, who's always been failing from the start, failure is considered a very natural thing; but to Saralegui, who's never experienced it, there's no better way to describe it other than a nightmare come true.

"If you want to escape, go ahead on your own."

The Shou Shimaron king asks, surprised,

"Eh?"

"If you're scared to become a hostage with me in the enemy camp, you can escape quietly. I'll give you a horse, and I can let you take some equestrian people with you as bodyguards as well. If you escape to their encampment, they might mistake you for Yelshi and catch you for ransom. If you think that's a lesser threat to your life, then go ahead, I won't blame you."

"But if I escape, Yelshi won't release your friend, y'know?"

"We'll figure out a way to solve that problem."

From the corner of my eye, I spy Conrad and Wolfram discussing something. Maybe they want to tell me the results of their discussion, because Wolfram nods at me with a mysterious-like expression.

Hazel is helping Ajira and his cousin, trying their best to make the dried grass into a torch. But Adalbert, who's considerate of the elderly, takes the work away from her hands and continues doing it.

As for the equestrian people waiting at a distance behind, because the flames in their hands are too close to the ground, they're not helping much with the illumination.

This is the current situation.

"I will figure out a way to solve it."

These are all the resources I have.

Yelshi appears riding on a white horse, holding a small lamp. He's not in the front of the pack, but two rows of undead behind, advancing together with other cavalrymen.

My mind is full of stupid things like 'not only is his steed pure white, he's as

white as the horse himself, so it mustn't be easy for him to survive in the desert, huh?' There's even a confused 'with such a small lamp, he probably can't even see how many fingers he has, can he?'

I'm still standing on my own two feet in the sand. After all, the brown horse I was riding had been borrowed from the equestrian people, so by now it's already exhausted.

"The sun has set."

Yelshi speaks simple common language, his relaxed tone carrying a hint of amusement,

"Hand over the Maou and Saralegui."

"I know."

The lamp Yelshi is holding is really too small, so I can only locate Murata, lying on the ground, by moonlight. Is he sleeping? I wonder if he's a bit better now.

The moonlight also shines on Josak, on horseback. Gurrier Josak—or a man who looks a lot like him. If I wanted to determine his expression, the moonlight now still isn't bright enough.

I want to bring them back together.

Standing in our frontlines, I say loudly,

"I agree to exchange hostages. I'm heading there right now."

"Then Sara?"

Yelshi seems to be tilting his head, his hair sliding to the side.

"Due to Saralegui's position, I cannot interfere with him under my jurisdiction."

"What?"

I take a deep breath, and continue.

"He is from Shou Shimaron, we mazoku have no right to decide His Majesty Saralegui's future! If you want to take away His Majesty Saralegui no matter what, then deal with Shou Shimaron directly!"

To be honest, he's not even here anymore. Not long ago I had let him escape under the cover of dusk, even giving him an easily manageable horse plus an equestrian tribe bodyguard. Besides that, I also reminded him not to light his lamp before getting a certain distance away, even telling him to go in a specified direction.

He was a Shou Shimaron person to start with, plus he's the boy king of a large country. He has no obligation to obey my orders, neither do I have the right to order him.

The cards in my hand don't include Saralegui.

Maybe he understands that it's no use no matter how he asks, because Yelshi's tone becomes slightly anxious,

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

Yelshi gives his men a simple order, and two horses leave immediately. Lucky, now the enemy has two fewer soldiers.

Get as far away as you can, Sara—Although he hasn't done anything good for me to pray for him, I still say that quietly in my heart.

"By the way, the only hostage you have is Murata, right? But you're asking to exchange him with two people, isn't that way too unfair? Technically I should be more than enough!"

I don't wait for Yelshi to reply, turning around immediately and walking towards the tent where the horses are gathered. I choose a docile horse and check if the saddle is steady. To prevent myself from tripping, I even tied up my cloak carefully.

"I wonder if we stand a chance...?"

Hazel looks at me silently, the corners of her lips rising as she murmurs. The light from the small fire allows me to see my companions' expressions clearly, and it puts my heart considerably at ease.

"This is your first time going into a battle without standing a chance?"

"Of course not, I've been facing situations like this all the while."

"Or do you always win your battles?"

"Not that, either."

"No no no, I can see from your expression, you should stand a rather high chance. According to my many years' of experience observing people, I can tell just by your expression."

"Does this count as fortune-telling?"

The old lady laughs, shaking her head. A thousand things are running through my head, but all I can say is,

"Hazel... No matter what, don't get hurt."

"Why so suddenly?"

I came here on a request to save you, but the problem is not only did I fail to save you, I even put you in more danger. I feel guilty towards those children.

I didn't think that it would be so hard to get onto a horse. I step on the stirrup with my left foot, straightening up my body in one go with my arm strength, and then move my right leg onto the other side—but just a moment's distraction will mess it up.

"Do you plan on going alone?"

Wolfram walks up to me quickly, perhaps to help me out.

"No, I'm taking Ajira with me. Although I feel bad for asking him, I still need a translator. Although I think it's not too possible, but Wolfram, um..."

"What is it?"

"Don't you come with me now."

Lord von Bielefeld narrows his eyes, saying in a calm voice,

"If milord just says the word, I would gladly go to the ends of the earth for you."

He's sounding all polite and respectful again, even though he knows very well I can't handle him at all when he's like this.

"Stop joking around, I'm going off to be a hostage, how could I possibly let you

come along."

"To be able to do even the slightest thing for Your Majesty, is my utmost pride and glory."

"T-thank you for your kind intentions, but I can't let you come with me, Lord von Bielefeld."

I don't know how many times I've come across this situation already. Once the other person treats me so sincerely, I get frustrated and impatient because I feel I need to repay in kind. In the end, I'll either make it worse, or say a bunch of random things.

"My beloved officer's life shouldn't be sacrificed for me, but contributed to the country."

"The two are one and the same."

"It's not like that, Wol ... "

That moment just as I'm turning around to face him, a strong impact assaults my stomach, and I nearly stop breathing. My mind goes blank for about five seconds, and I've no idea what happened, only managing to kneel on the ground, groaning in pain. I try to take in a breath so hard, but I can't do it.

"Wolf... What did... you do..."

"I'm sorry."

By the time I realize that I had taken a punch from him, he's already taken off my hooded cloak. I'm all curled up, lying on the sand, the pain making me hold my stomach, unable to breathe. It's obviously already night time, yet my eyes are filled with a sea of red, my throat making a piercing sound, and still the air doesn't enter my lungs.

"Ah..."

A strong and forceful hand suddenly grabs my jaw, closing my mouth so I can't make a sound. I can't stop the tears from flowing due to the pain.

"See, once you let your guard down, tragedy will strike."

I open my mouth like a fish, but can't breathe normally because of that palm.

The tears well from the corners of my eyes and slide down my cheeks, wetting his fingers.

"Shh—Hey, don't bite me, my fingers aren't food."

He drags me behind the horse, my body almost suspended in the air with only the balls of my feet touching the ground, while my back is leaning on Adalbert's sturdy pectorals.

"It's because the third son made the move that you're suffering so much now, this way you'll be hurting for another two, three days. If it were up to me from the start, I just had to give you one blow to the heart and you'd be out cold."

My vision finally returns to normal. In front of my eyes, blurred with tears of pain, I see two familiar figures. The shorter one quickly puts on the hooded cloak, as though scared of being seen. As my sight clears up, I see the other figure, undisguised.

The figure on the horse in just in between us and Yelshi, but he seems to be closer to us.

Adalbert is muffling my mouth as I murmur,

"Why?"

Why is it Conrad and Wolfram?

The translator and I never stepped out from our frontlines, so why are Conrad and Wolfram going to Yelshi?

"Your Majesty the Emperor of Seisakoku!"

Lord Weller yells out to Yelshi. Although I can only see his brown hair and back, I still know what expression he's wearing as he starts the negotiations. He must be calm and collected, his brow creased but not as bad as his older brother, a small smile on his lips.

But once I hear his next words, even I can't guess his expression anymore—Because Conrad holds his little brother's shoulders lightly as he says,

"I'm taking His Majesty Yuuri over there now."

Who?

I can't voice my question. Even if my mouth wasn't covered, the sound I make is still unbelievably hoarse.

Who did he say he was taking to Yelshi... His Majesty Yuuri... Me?

"I wonder if it'll work, huh. Although the body shape is about the same, but everything will be ruined once the other side sees his hair. If right now the hood is taken off, it'll all be over."

Adalbert mutters into my ear,

"Now we can only pray the wind won't blow."

Ahead, Lord Weller raises his right hand to show he isn't hostile,



"As for the matter of the Shou Shimaron King, Saralegui's escape just now, I have a suggestion here. I am Lord Weller, participating in this journey as the ambassador of Dai Shimaron. I'm also in charge of overseeing His Majesty Saralegui's actions as the suzerain of Shou Shimaron."

Since the enemy has the hostage Murata, they can't simply walk to the middle, and thus they stop where they are and continue speaking to Yelshi,

"That's why, regarding His Majesty Saralegui's actions, I have to bear responsibility as well. From Dai Shimaron's point of view, I don't wish to ruin Your Majesty the Emperor of Seisakoku's mood with this diplomacy trip, which would then affect the relationship to be built in the future between you and Shou Shimaron, or even Dai Shimaron. Therefore, Your Majesty Yelshi—"

A breeze interrupts Conrad's speech, and scares me until I shake uncontrollably. Thankfully the breeze only slightly moves the grey cloth.

"Could you please restate the requests you have of His Majesty Saralegui? I hope you can tell me what your country wants from Shou Shimaron. If possible, we, Dai Shimaron, will discuss your requests in place of Shou Shimaron, and hand this person—"

He pushes Wolfram softly,

"—The Maou of Shin Makoku, His Majesty Yuuri, as a gift to you."

No, that's Wolfram, not me.

My stomach, having taken a fist, hurts even more. The vision that had cleared blurs once again.

"Forgive me for being rude, but if it's to do with Shou Shimaron's national matters, I think I should be of use."

Just as usual, his tone puts the listener at ease, or it could be because of his smile.

"In order to successfully solve this hostage incident, we have been mentally prepared to fulfill all your requests. If you can understand our Dai Shimaron's position, there may be more room for discussion."

What does that mean? What is that person saying?

"He's showing that his position is fairly important."

"Wha..."

"You haven't heard?"

Covering my mouth, Adalberts whispers,

"Lord Weller suddenly came to Dai Shimaron one day, and became an unmistakable presence among the high officials in no time at all. Of course it helps that his swordsmanship is exceptional, but that's not the most important reason."

I touch Adalbert's finger, and he relaxes his hand a little too. This way not only can I breathe easily, I can talk as well.

"After all, to the common folk, he's His Excellency the Prince."

"Because he's Lady Cheri's..."

"Not that."

I look at Conrad and Wolfram's backs, as I listen to 'Lord Weller's' situation in the foreign country.

"Weller's ancestors used to be the kings that ruled over part of Dai Shimaron. But halfway through, they were forced to change their name and kept under house arrest in the castle, until his father's generation left the country. You should know 'im, right? Yup, it's Dunheely Weller. The man who was in love... had an intimate relationship with the mazoku queen. Although I heard this rumor before, when I saw that actual documents also mentioned this incident, I couldn't help but laugh out loud. Don't you find it ironic? The descendants of the king who were chased out of the human country, actually ended up with the ruler of the mazoku. And besides—"

Since Adalbert is suppressing his laughter, his wide pectorals are trembling non-stop.

"Speaking of being exiled from the homeland, the truth is the same goes for us Ten Aistocrats."

The Conrad in front of my eyes continues to talk in an even deeper, steadier voice, his voice so soft we can't hear it.

"To you, Conrad's impression in our eyes is very capable even if people do complain about him, he's a brilliant soldier, and he's also Her Majesty the Maou's second son. But that's not the case for those guys in Dai Shimaron. After

all, there are many people in the continent Shimaron is governing who still support his ancestors, that's why even if the current king Berard wants desperately to cut him down, he can't show it on the surface. Besides, rumor has it that some of the people holding important positions at the palace secretly still respect the exiled royalty a lot."

"To them, Conrad is..."

"Practically a messiah-like existence, just like a religion. Though my position right now is of a messiah as well."

I recall Berard the Fourth and Second that I faced off a few times before. Although they're uncle and nephew, the two of them don't get along at all. If another opponent shows up with a lot of secret supporters—

"Berard wouldn't like that, huh..."

"That's why it's complicated.

"If they're hostile, they would incur the dislike of those who worship the Weller family; if they raise their hands in welcome, they would harm the political authority they have now. That's why Berard decided to treat the descendant of the exiled royalty with a respectful, open-hearted attitude, welcoming Lord Weller Conrad as Dai Shimaron's friend and guest. For Berard, he wanted to show off his own generosity, but instead he was met by a lot of dissatisfaction, from those who think he gave the newbie too much freedom."

"Isn't that really dangerous? For all you know those people who are unsatisfied might try to assassinate him."

"I don't know—Maybe he expected this sort of result from the start, and still went back to Dai Shimaron. But after he went back, there have been quite a few shocking rumors."

"Don't tell me they're assassination plans!?"

I turn my head to stare at Adalbert's blue eyes, and the hand around my mouth naturally lets go as well.

"Either that, or someone in Dai Shimaron wants to kill Conrad, who's in the way."

"Of course not, the rumors are that his previously peaceful worshippers are starting to move in secret. I heard that there's a bunch of underground communications that cannot be known to the public."

This reminds me of something he said.

I went to sow seeds.

"Conrad..."

What kind of seeds did you go to Dai Shimaron to sow?

Even if my heart is full of questions, Lord Weller's discussions with the Seisakoku emperor continue on unperturbed. Conrad raises the torch up high, saying something to Yelshi. Because the torch is raised high, and the light finally reaches the frontlines of the enemy camp, I manage to see Murata's body move a little.

"Murata!?"

I can't help but want to rush forward, desperately breaking away from the thick arms holding me captive.

"Hey, don't squirm around!"

But I'm immediately captured again, the pain in my abdomen making me weak. Plus, my muscles can't beat his.

"Let go of me, Adalbert! I can't not go!"

"Sorry, that's impossible. I was asked not to let you, the real thing, escape while they're going there in your place. Did you think those two would offer their beloved king to the enemy? If you really did think so, there's a major problem with your brain."

Adalbert lifts me up with his arms and gets on horseback. The original plan was to use this method to grab Murata and then run full speed away, but now I'm the one carried onto a horse instead. How did it end up like this!?

"This is those guys' decision – even if they have to sacrifice their lives, they will let their beloved lord escape, how loyal of them! As for my loyalty, I threw it away into a toilet on my journeys a long time ago."

"Wait a sec! Just wait, damnit! What sacrifice! I don't want things to end up like that! I didn't ask them to do it, how could you let them do it!? Is this a secret rebellion? Hazel, this counts as rebellion, right!?"

"Unfortunately, Your Majesty..."

Hearing me call her in English, Hazel Graves shakes her head of white hair,

"All I see is self-sacrifice for their lord."

I really shouldn't have asked a Christian like her.

"Hey hey hey, Your Majesty! Didn't I tell you to pipe down? Thank goodness you weren't discovered, we have to take this chance and get out of here. You stay still a bit, I won't treat you bad."

"But Murata, and Wolfram, once he's discovered to be a fake..."

"Hold on a sec, Your Majesty!"

Hazel says, simply and efficiently, in a low voice to grab my attention. She points at the enemy lines behind Conrad, in other words at the feet of the man that looks like Josak. My gaze follows the direction her finger is pointing, and I can't help but yelp in surprise.

Murata, who had been lying on the ground, is trying to support his upper body with his hands. He couldn't possibly have heard me, but when I called my friend's name in this faraway place, he seems to have regained consciousness.

The problem is the next second.

"Your Eminence!"

Conrad calls out to him. Murata probably can't see his face without his glasses, but he should be able to know who the newcomer is judging from the voice. Hearing a friendly voice from his own side should put his heart slightly at ease.

But instead of feeling comforted, Murata makes a sound like a wail,

"Why is Lord Weller here!"

With that not only us, even Yelshi is taken by surprise. The man that was unconscious on the ground, suddenly makes a sound that reverberates everywhere. Where did he get that strength from? But what surprises me isn't

his powerful voice.

"No! Lord von Bielefeld and Lord Weller mustn't come here!"

"Your Eminence!?"

"Your Majesty the Emperor! Your Majesty the Emperor of Seisakoku! Anybody, anybody, just help me translate! These two people have no authority whatsoever, they don't have any power or assets even after they return to the country. Don't exchange me with those two!"

Putting Conrad aside, I don't know how Murata discovered it was Wolfram, but he really is desperate to stop them advancing any further.

"They're trying to trick you, Emperor of Seisakoku! They plan on sending two people who are strong in martial arts to kill me in case I pose a threat to them later! You can't let them get near! They plan on taking Your Majesty the Emperor's life after they've dealt with me! You mustn't make a deal with them!"

Why is he resisting so stubbornly? But I immediately think of the reason.

The Box in the stone room...

I think Murata said something like that?

I hear a short murmur from behind me, and the power gripping me instantly relaxes. So I throw caution to the winds and desperately wave my limbs to break free from Adalbert's grasp, only to fall off the horse as a result. My waist is hit with an intense impact, but now isn't the time to yell in pain.

Hazel was forced into this world by the Box running out of control, and then Murata told me in Japanese that the Box is in the tomb. In that case...

"Over here!"

Even if I stumble due to my feet sinking into the sand, I still dash forth with everything I have.

I must not let Conrad near the Box!

I'm afraid even Wolfram can't be allowed near it. Since Murata said that, it's highly likely Lord von Bielefeld is a hazard risk related to the Box as well. No matter what, I can't let the two of them go anywhere near the forbidden Boxes.

The tragedy of Caloria must never be repeated!

"I'm here!"

All eyes gather on me.

It took a while, but I was supposed to be the hostage from the very start anyway.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

By the time I finally catch up to those brothers, I'm already panting for breath. Add that to the cold sweat on my brow from the pain in my stomach, and I'm the furthest thing from being calm and collected.

Maybe it's because I'm too much of a mess, Conrad and Wolfram both reach out their hands to try and help me up, but I don't need their kindness right now.

"Did I ask you two to do this?"

Maybe he didn't expect me to ask so suddenly, because Wolfram seems to be frozen in shock.

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"Whose idea was it?"
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"Your Majesty."

Conrad wanted to interrupt, but Wolfram gets there first, replying,

"It was mine."

"Now you've done it!"

Before I even finish saying the words, I've already pulled him by the clothes on his chest. I don't hold back at all, our faces almost colliding. His eyes look different than usual, because of the illumination from the torch.

"What does it mean when you hit my stomach, huh? You want to divorce? Or remarry? [1]"

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"It's to show my love and respect [2]..."
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"Liar."

I took a punch to the stomach for nothing, and it's been hurting ever since then all the way until now. If I don't force myself to stand with my back straight, I'd probably be holding my stomach and crouching on the ground by now. If it weren't for Yelshi watching from the side, I'd have done that long ago.

To be honest, I wanted to butt my head against his hard, but exerting myself now will only make the pain worse. That's why I thought of admonishing him in public.

"I'll remember this, and make you pay!"

I brush off Conrad's hand, trying to support me, and say with my back turned to them,

"Go back, both of you!"

"But Your Majesty..."

"Didn't you hear me?"

The two fall silent.

I face Yelshi once more, walking towards him step by step,

"Your Majesty Yelshi, I'm coming over now. That's right, I don't have any guns on me."

Just like the cops on TV, I raise my hands up high to show I'm not carrying any weapons. This is my first time becoming a hostage of my own will too, so I really don't know what to do.

"That's not right, is it!?"

Murata starts yelling again. He's sprawled on the ground and trying his hardest to stand. I want to tell him not to force himself, but I also wish he'd get here faster, get back to our side faster!

He raises his head to look at Yelshi diagonally behind him,

"Aren't you exchanging with your older brother!? Why is it suddenly Shibuya, why must you pull Yuuri into this? You brothers should settle your arguments on your own! That's what everybody else does!"

"Relax, Murata. Everything will go according to the original plan. Your Majesty Yelshi!"

Damn, although I want to sound commanding, I just can't exert any force with

my stomach.

"Everything goes according to the original deal, exchanging me with the hostage. But the hostage in question cannot walk on his own, please have someone come with him."

My finger points at Josak, on horseback, but his gaze is still trained on the sky. He looks completely unconcerned with me and Murata, or even his current master Yelshi, acting as though his soul isn't home.

"You really want him? He's an elite soldier, you know?"

"I know."

I know better than anyone.

Yelshi gives an order in a few short words, and Josak gets off the horse to grab Murata's right hand. But his rough actions make me feel like screaming.

Stop, don't be so rough! That's Murata there, aren't you two really close!? There's no need to treat Murata like that, is there!? Besides, I thought you don't understand Seisakoku at all? Didn't you say you don't understand their language whatsoever?

But he's still dragging (our) friend^[3] towards Conrad's direction, and I desperately swallow the words I want to scream. Nevertheless, some of that anger I can't control still turns to words,

"Now that it's come to this, you shouldn't need any elite soldiers, should you, Yelshi? Yor Majesty has a ton of guys who aren't scared of dying with you, or could it be..."

When I'm angry, I just want to say something to rile them up, just like an elementary school student.

"Maybe they're not unafraid of dying, but simply unfortunate people who were abandoned? In that sense they're rather like you, Your Majesty Yelshi."

What a perfect performance of a sore loser.

But Yelshi reacts to these sour-grape words, and so the blood vessels in my left pinky are affected as well, so much so I nearly yell 'ouch'. I seem to see red light scattering in front of my eyes, so I look around hurriedly, but all I find are the

moonlight and some torches shining down lightly on Yelshi, the horses, and the resurrected group.

On the other hand, the red light is moving towards my brain instead. There are even images like drawings or photos flashing by. I can't describe it very well, but it feels a lot like taking pictures with a camera while standing in the middle of countless grey bottles.

What were those images?

But before I can figure out the answer, the images have already vanished from my brain. Maybe it's because Yelshi isn't as agitated anymore, so the thoughts transmitted through the ring are cut short as well.

Josak is probably showing his regular caution unconsciously, stopping ten steps away from Conrad and releasing Murata, who he had been dragging all the way here, then retreating quickly as they reach out to catch Murata.

Operation Capture Gurrier has failed.

I don't have the time to regret it before my wrist is grabbed by Yelshi, on horseback, and I'm taken back to their base.

We couldn't see that clearly from our base after all, so I didn't expect to see a large open space in the middle of Yelshi's camp. It's practically like a Japanese warring period army base there, and there's everything the lord could need during his stay. There are even two shinzoku soldiers holding up torches, so it's a lot brighter than outside the lines.

There are two 'thrones' much more extravagant than folding chairs in front of the tombs, and there's someone sitting in one of them.

That person is wearing formal clothes made of high quality ebony-colored cloth, the collar almost covering the chin, as well as sleeves and gloves covering the arms, so there's not a single inch of skin exposed. Those white hands... No, white gloves are holding a thick book, with the same leather cover as Günter's diary.

Rather than looking at her face, my gaze is attracted to the fearsome object in front of the chair.

Faced with the reunion I wouldn't have wanted in a million years, my pulse speeds up, as though someone has a tight grasp on my heart.

"Why would it be in a place like this..."

That is the familiar wooden box I couldn't forget even if I wanted to, the one I had seen a few times before—once in Caloria, once in Shimaron.

The Box that has the soushu with terrifying power sealed inside, will only bring disasters unto people. The only thing inside is unpredictability, without any hope whatsoever; it is something hard to grasp.

The reason Murata used Japanese was to tell me about this.

"What do you plan to do by bringing the Box to this sort of place?"



My voice is exceptionally calm. So that's it, since the Box is here, it's only natural that we can't let Lord Weller get near it. But from the way Murata was shouting desperately, it seems to be related to Wolfram as well, though this is the first time I've heard about this myself.

Although the size is about the same, it looks drier than the previous two, and

there are a lot of scratches on the surface of the wooden box. And compared to the simplicity of the past ones, it has really extravagant decorations. I was wondering why its position seems rather high, and it turns out it was placed on a trolley. This way they could pull it along with horses, which is indeed very convenient.

I don't know where it was dug out from, but the surface of the Box is covered with shards of stone and dust. The place where it left the earth... is probably the place Hazel Graves arrived in this world after being blasted here.

Yelshi revels in it, caressing the dusty surface of the Box with his white palm, "This is Mother's precious Box."

I'm taken by shock, could it be that he knows the power of this wooden box and its reason for existing?

"Mother always said, this is the Box of miracles."

"Forget miracles, it's the Box of disasters."

When Yelshi mentioned 'Mother', he glanced at the person in formal clothes sitting on the chair. In that case, that person is none other than Yelshi's mother, Alazon, huh? But her son is talking to a stranger beside her, and she's still unmoving as stone, could she be asleep?

"This is the Box of miracles that can bestow life."

"I already said it's not nearly something as good as that! Throw it away, throw it away immediately! Otherwise yet another place would... I don't want to say anything unlucky, in any case just put it back where you found it."

Yelshi denies it strongly, creasing his shaped brows. Does he seriously think that's a Box of miracles, does he really believe it will do something as peaceful as bestowing life? Too bad I can't tell from his expression, and besides, my persuasion skills aren't good enough to bring out his true feelings.

And I don't know the Seisakoku language either, the only reason I can communicate with Yelshi is because the other side knows the common language.

In that case, there's only one way to find out his true thoughts. Although it'll hurt a lot, it's the most practical method.

"Oh—So it's the Box of hope, huh? You sure love peace, huh, Your Majesty Yelshi. But your older brother sure understood perfectly well what power it has, y'know! Looks like your brother Saralegui is one step above you."

I have to do my best to make him angry, rile him up, get his emotions agitated.

"Saralegui doesn't know."

On the surface, it looks like he replied very calmly, but the roiling emotions in his heart prove otherwise, yelling out something completely different.

(No way, there's no way!)

If he doesn't take my words to heart, that would be the end of that, but Yelshi is successfully riled up by my amateurish methods. He probably isn't that used to being looked down on, huh? When the voice of his heart reaches my brain, my pinky is pinched tightly as well.

(He dared say that damned guy is smart? There's no such thing at all!)

How could he say something like 'damned'?

"It's precisely because he's too perfect that he was sent to your father's country, right? He was really smart since he was young, and it was highly likely that he would threaten your position."

He cocks his head adorably, as though he doesn't understand at all, but his inner thoughts are extremely agitated.

(There's no way, it's impossible! I asked so many times, when I asked, crying, "Why did you send Saralegui to another country?", Mother would tell me everything, she told me!)

I resist with everything I have, refusing to look down no matter how much my stomach and pinky hurt. Just thinking that I can't let Yelshi sense anything amiss makes me afraid to move even an inch without thinking it through first.

If he were to find out this ring's effects and control his own emotions, I won't have any way to find out what he's thinking. Once I think that, all I can do is grip my choked pinky tightly. I press my palm on my lap, staring at Yelshi quietly, my tightly clenched teeth even creaking.

(Apparently it's so he won't die. What did she mean by not letting him die, how

stupid. I heard the maids say, he didn't have any signs of life from the moment he was born, he was dead when he was born! Before Mother carried him down the funeral path to this tomb, before the gods and our ancestors in heaven bestowed him with life, Saralegui wasn't breathing at all.)

I can't help but think of the dream I had in the underground tunnel. A young woman who looked like a mother crying and praying with a baby in her arms, praying that this child would be saved no matter what she had to do, even saying things like why would you steal the son I finally managed to get from my hands.

Did she mean Saralegui?

(Mother always said that Saralegui's life comes from the Box. If it weren't for that Box, my older brother would have died long ago. Afterwards the shadow of death slowly enveloped him, so she sent Saralegui back to Shou Shimaron together with Father. She was scared the Box would take away the life it gave, so she sent Brother to another country, definitely not because he's smarter than me. Idiot, the one who knows nothing about the Box is you.)

You keep on getting worked up, before I find out everything to do with the Box, you can laugh at me and insult me all you want.

(This time the Box will surely also bestow life again, and give weakened Mother a brand new life.)

"Don't you agree, Mother?"

Yelshi says to the woman in formal clothes, pulling up her veil happily with his fingers,

"Mother, the king of Shin Makoku came to greet you."

"She's long dead."

Murata clears his throat and says,

"Long dead, that's just a corpse. No, it's not even a corpse, it's become a mummy. Yelshi has always been living with his mother's remains."

"But would the shinzoku allow such-- such disrespectful behavior!?"

Morally upright Lord von Bielefeld reacts first, creasing his brow with an expression of disgust.

"I don't understand shinzoku religion at all."

"Well, religiously speaking, it's not like there's no such thing."

Hazel Graves speaks up as she throws the precious fuel into the fire. It seems as though she knew about the term 'mummy' from the start, could it be that the pronunciation is very similar in English and the common language? Murata tries to compare the two languages, and realizes that there are no similarities at all.

"In Central and South America, there are those who feed and offer incense to the mummies, or even live with them. In the past I went to villages where they greeted or talked to mummies like usual. Rather than a god, it's more like they treat him as head of the family. There's been this culture of living with the dead since a long, long time ago."

Then she adds with a shrug,

"It's fine once you get used to it. Besides, in that trip I wasn't looking for the ancient secret chambers the mummy was protecting, but a crystal football."

"Hazel, you didn't call me for that trip."

Murata is also shocked with the words he said without thinking, but he immediately warns himself—not me, I'm not the French doctor.

Hazel is out of the loop, her expression full of surprise as she stares at the boy she met for the first time,

"Have you seen me somewhere before?"

"No, this is our first time meeting each other, I'm just slightly nostalgic, that's all. Anyway, Yelshi is living with his mummified mother, and he believes that his mother Alazon is still alive."

He takes a few gulps of the water someone else gave him, and coughs a few times before saying,

"Because she can speak."

"Speak!?"

Wolfram seems to really interested in this. Feeling the heat from the fire, Murata thinks how warm this place is while he worries for his friend who is heading for somewhere cold. He must think of something, and the sooner the better. He doesn't want to let him stay by those guys' side for even a second.

"It's not like she really can speak, it's just Yelshi's personal thoughts. He can sense the strong will left on the corpse, and decided that his mother is speaking, when in fact it's only the residual thoughts left on the corpse. At times like this, I feel that people with supernatural powers, like ESP or super senses, are just a pain."

"That's right, I think Germany did some research in that area."

"To me, Esper Ito^[4] is more than enough when it comes to supernatural powers, or at least he's way better than that guy."

But on this land where bone-statics are often used to their full extent, it's hard to deny supernatural powers even if you wanted to.

"On the other hand, when on earth will the special forces team get here? I can't wait to get some strong reinforcements so we can get Yuuri back."

"Sizemore and Dacascos have already gone out scouting, and Yuuri ordered them to take the next course of action immediately if they don't find anything."

"You should be calling him Your Majesty, Lord Weller."

Conrad hears that but brushes it off with a vague answer.

"But what is the next course of action? Does anyone know?"

"Since they're supposed to keep going in the same direction, maybe it's to head for the secret port. Otherwise..."

"Alright, Lord von Bielefeld, you tell me what else is in that direction in a while. Then right now, your orders are to meet with the special forces team, and launch a surprise attack when the sun comes up. If the zombie army moves in the night, follow them and find out what they're up to. Am I right?"

"It seems that way for now."

"What is this, to think Yuu-chan's plan is so well thought out, and also unexpectedly cautious. But he is king, after all, and he's a catcher to boot, so it's not surprising he's so detailed."

Conrad is somewhat anxious, and asks in a tone that says he can't hold it in anymore,

"Your Eminence, do you really plan on letting that guy go on his own?"

Speaking of which, Adalbert has been nowhere to be seen since just now, and he's not mixing with the equestrian people either.

"Do you still have to ask? It's too dangerous to send you or Lord von Bielefeld, and we don't know when the Box will open, releasing those guys. And that Box just has to be 'Inferno on the Tundra', too. If anyone from the Bielefeld family were to get close to it, nothing good will come from that."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, someone in the Bielfeld family is the Key."

The two mazoku princes both hold their breaths in surprise.

"It may not necessarily be you, but there is a Key somewhere in your clan. As for that Box... in other words, 'Inferno on the Tundra', it's still stuck in the cave now, so there's nothing much to worry about as long as the Key doesn't approach it—though that's only as long as it's not disturbed."

"Why would someone in Wolfram's clan be the Key?"

"Mn, in truth I didn't need to wait until we found the Box to tell you about this. Because that was decided long in the distant past, apparently the four Keys to the Boxes sealing the soushu were each handed to trustworthy clans who fought the soushus bravely. Three went to the mazoku and one to humans, von Bielefeld and Weller being two of them. Ah—back then they were called Belar? The memory's too old, so I'm a little confused. Is it Weller or Mohenja-Daro?"

"What about the other two? Don't tell me one is Voltaire?"

"That's right."

Worried about his oldest brother, the third son puts his hand on his forehead, lowering his head as he mutters.

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"And the last one?"

"Wincott!?"
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Conrad looks very uneasy as he murmurs to himself. According to Murata's observations, he has a very deep connection to the von Wincott family."

"That's right, they tend to be a kind and compassionate, yet at the same time brave and proud family. And they really hate things that break the rules, too, they won't tolerate everything regardless of good or bad. Although I don't know what their descendants are like... Anyway, there will definitely be someone holding the Key in these four families, that's why I warned you not to approach the Boxes no matter what. As for Yuuri... As long as the other side doesn't mess around, he can't open the seal on his own."

He says the last bit vaguely, so the others can't understand what he's talking about.

"Hearing the equestrian people's panicked voices, Venera and Conrad walk towards the back. They're probably just temporarily nervous because they can't see their messiah and mermaid.

Left alone with Murata, Wolfram murmurs,

"I heard that the Key rests in one part of the body..."

"Mn, that's right."

"Weller's is the left arm... Brother and I..."

"So what if you know? Besides, the Key isn't necessarily you. You can't tell who the Key is from the outside, y'know! If you want to know no matter what, then go investigate the birth dates. If you weren't born when someone in the clan died, the chances of you inheriting the Key are really low. Although I think the mazoku don't place much emphasis on birthdays, right?"

"That is true. Wait, do you mean it's reincarnation?"

"Could we call it reincarnation..."

Murata sags his shoulders, feeling irritated with Wolfram's stubborn insistence

on getting to the bottom of things. In his heart he's thinking, "I'm a patient, you know, you tell me to rest then ask me a ton of questions. And right now the most important thing is saving Yuuri. Besides, I never once thought you guys would actually hand Yuuri over so easily, at least you should resist a bit, right? No matter how obedient you are of his orders, you should still see the situation, right?" It's just that no matter how he curses them in his heart, he can't change the fact that he's helpless.

Right now there's no way to solve this seeming stalemate either.

"The problem is in the soul. Think about it, what method is there to make sure every generation has something that important? It's to hide it in the soul, otherwise there's no better way to pass it down the generations. In the von Bielefeld family, there should be one person who owns a soul that's been used over and over again since their ancestor's time. It may be your father, or your uncle, or someone who married out of the family, or it could be some distant relative who doesn't have the Bielefeld last name now, or might not even be in this world right now. Anyway, that person with the same soul has the Key in one part of their body before they are born."

"So it's all in the soul!?"

"That's right, isn't it the same with maryoku? That is also buried somewhere deep in the soul. Otherwise let me ask you again, do you think there's any other method?"

Lord Weller, who was talking with the equestrian people, turns around and says loudly,

"Your Eminence, it's not good for your body if you force yourself, you'll make His Majesty worry."

"Oh dear, the only person present who has no right to tell me off is you, Lord Weller. Don't forget who it was that made my Yuu-chan worry so much—"

"If that someone is me, that is far too flattering."

Hazel can't understand a word they're saying, and yet she laughs with her arms across her chest,

"You guys are just like little teenage girls."

No matter how you look at it, that is not a compliment.

Although it does need life, it's already far too late for this body.

It's hard for me say that as I watch Yelshi talk to the mummified remains in front of me, even bringing his ear up to it and then laughing from deep within his throat,

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"Listen, she replied."

"...Who?"

"Mother."

Of course Alazon's decayed body can't speak.

"The only one talking just now was you, that person is already..."

"No, she spoke."
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Yelshi raises his pretty brows. By the time I realize 'I pissed him off', the pain has already gotten more intense, a lot like I'm being poked by a bunch of needles. But I haven't forgotten that when the ring hurts me, Yelshi's thoughts reach my mind as well. Of course, it's the same now.

He turns back and says again to his mother,

(Please forgive his rudeness...)

The next second I immediately unleash a scream, my whole body moving back and away from them. I know my face is getting paler and paler, my mouth gaping like a koi from the extreme fear.

I heard Alazon's voice.

In reality Alazon hadn't spoken, and her voice didn't reach my ears either. It's just the voice Yelshi heard reaching my mind through his thoughts.

In those short couple of seconds, one word was repeated again and again at a speed normal people could never manage. This is what Alazon said:

"Yelshi, this person is dead! She can't possibly speak, once a person becomes a mummy like this, there's no way they could still be alive!"

The second after I yell, my gaze meets Alazon, and a chill runs down my spine. No, she's not glaring at me, it's just that her eyeballs are fixed forward.

Although Alazon looks like a properly-made mummy, her eyeballs are still intact. Of course they're completely different from a live person's, the humors are completely murky. I really want to ask Murata what they must do to a body to make it this way.

But right now Murata is in a safe place with my comrades, so that's the most comforting news in these past few hours.

"Besides, if Alazon really is still alive as you say, why would she say 'Key'!?" (She's alive, Mother is still alive!)

Even if he's screaming like that in his heart, on the surface he's still looking at me with a smile. How on earth did he train up that poker face? I really want to ask him for his secrets.

(Although she's a little weak now, she just has to get life from the Box, and Mother will return to her original healthy body!)

"I already said this body... isn't something so good as to bestow life, in fact it's a terrifying Box that brings disasters. But you can't open it without a Key anyway."

"Key?"

Yelshi smiles. When I know how cunning and manipulative his older brother is, I feel as though his smile looks like an angel. But no matter what, don't fall for it—the pain darting from my finger to my back makes me shake my heavy head.

Don't fall for it. Even if he has a gentle, honest face, this is the man that controls the dead and Josak, the one who put Murata through so much suffering, even now...

"There's a Key."

Golden eyes reflect the swaying light of the torch, and my hand is gripped tightly, until I couldn't break free even if I wanted to.

He seems to know that I'm now suffering from pain from my stomach, my head, and the pain caused by the ring.

- 1. ___ Rikon(離婚)=divorce, and saikon=remarrying (someone else), are words you use once you're married, and can't be used in any other situations. There is a term for breaking off an engagement, konyakuhaki (婚約破棄, yes, it's a term not a sentence), but he doesn't say that.
- 2. <u>↑</u> The word Wolfram uses for 'love and respect' keiai(敬愛), doesn't mean romantic love, that would be renai(恋愛), so it's the love you feel for someone you respect. But Yuuri doesn't believe him, so... I wonder what he believes.
- 3. <u>↑</u> There's no pronoun here, which is normal for Japanese but doesn't work in English. Meaning Yuuri could be referring to Murata as 'my' friend or 'your' friend, maybe also 'our'.
- 4.

 ___ Esper Ito is a Japanese comedian who uses supernatural abilities as a running gag.

(http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2008/11/11/people/comedian-esper-ito/#.Vx70nfl97IV)

Chapter 6

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Only now do I regret not grabbing him back then, but it's already too late. Josak is now Yelshi's subordinate, and he's even grabbing my neck like I'm a small animal, the fingers touching my skin cold as ice.

"Wait a sec, Yelshi! You seem to have misunderstood something!"

Yelshi orders Josak to walk here from the frontlines in Seisakoku language, and he glances at me once before twisting my arms behind my back, then grabbing my neck and pushing me towards the Box. The stone shards and sand on the cover keep on scraping my cheek.

Standing beside his mother, Yelshi just cocks his head with a smile, pretending not to understand me. Only then do I realize I can't hear his inner voice. Crap, I can't let him calm down! In order to know his true intentions, I have to figure out a way to agitate him.

To make someone angry, you must diss their family. If someone insulted my mother, I'd fly off the handle too. Although it's really tough to insult someone else's mother, now isn't the time to worry about little things like that.

"Yo—Your momma is a mummy!"

That doesn't seem right, but if you're asking me to insult someone from the bottom of my heart, I really can't think of what to say immediately.

"Yelshi, I don't know if that stick-thin corpse that's nothing more than bones wrapped in skin is your mother or not! But that Box isn't the convenient treasure chest you think it is! Forget bestowing life, it might even bring big problems... No, no! Even if you open it, it's empty inside! That hurts, that really hurts!"

"Stop, Josak!"

In that second, it feels like the force lessened, making me think he may have heard my voice, but it immediately returns to full force, so it seems like that was just me. And my body is even turned around so I'm lying on the Box, my whole body pressed between the Box's corner and Josak's arm, while my neck is being wrung.

How ironic, this is the way I meet him face to face for the first time. I stare at his eyes, but there's no familiar twinkle in his eyes, just darkness, emptiness, slightly reflecting the light of the torch.

"Josak... You're wrong... You're not this kind of guy's... subordinate."

I'm starting to gasp for air.

(But he's obviously a Key.)

Yelshi's thoughts suddenly reach my brain again. But right now I can barely breathe, and I can't tell anymore if the pain I'm feeling comes from my little finger. Although, even if I don't make him angry, it seems that his uneasiness from the confusion and impatience is enough to let the ring work.

(I heard that a special member of the mazoku is the Key to the Box, and it's apparently the double-black Maou. Although that double-black just now wasn't it, this one must be the right one. Technically there shouldn't be anyone more special than him!)

"Don't tell me you... to Murata, too!?"

Murata was treated this cruelly as well!?

In the span of the next three heartbeats, something changes inside my body, it feels like all the skin on my body opens up, and some power trembling in wait inside is about to explode from the surface. It's obviously my throat, my eyes, and my mouth, but it feels like I'm sharing them with another, that anxious feeling making me tremble from the tips of my fingers.

"What they call the inferno..."

Even the words I speak aren't of my own volition.

"Shouldn't exist in this world, a power that even I don't have."

My hand moves on its own, knocking into the inner side of Josak's arm. At the same time, I make a sweep with my leg, taking him off balance and then kicking him hard in the stomach, then swinging my left fist at his jaw, using the momentum to stand up and then bending over, attacking his eyes with my right hand unhesitatingly. Before he can manage to avoid that, I kick his head when he's off-guard.

Just like that, Josak collapses to the ground.

"O fire, o wind, o earth, vanish as you wish! Those who obey others have no choice but to die! Only I have the right to exist in this world, and only my power can destroy the world!"

I step on the orange-haired man's hand to seal his movements, and look at the young man who seems to be a king, standing still—That is a child with fair skin, something like a tomb next to him, and his hands are gripping a corpse tightly. It looks like an unfamiliar religious ritual.

"Are you the one trying to release the Inferno on the Tundra?"

His slender arms don't look like they held a sword before. Such a weak creature wants to release the soushu of fire? With every step I take forward, the sand underneath my feet slides along as well, and it feels very uncomfortable.

"Remember, if you want to destroy this world, if you want to end it, you do not need to rely on flames. Only the tranquility of the bottom of the water can put all life to eternal sleep."

The young man's golden eyes go wide, so it looks like it's his first time meeting someone with a Key.

"I forbid you from obeying others."

My finger reaches for his jaw, even moving down his cheek, stiff with terror. He's shaking.

(Who!?)

Yelshi is shaking, the voice transmitted directly into my brain turning sharp and short from the extreme fear. Is he afraid of me? Afraid of me, who was just pressed down and unable to move, like a frog waiting to be dissected?

I can't help but shrink my hand back, what, what on earth did I do!?

This is different from the situation after I use majutsu, instead of saying it's really easy for me to recall what happened in those dozens of seconds, it's better to say I don't have to recall anything at all, because my memory never stopped from the beginning. That feeling is like someone borrowed my body, and it's as smooth as a pilot and co-pilot taking turns steering the plane.

But even if I remember what my body did, I can't remember what I said very well. I think I mentioned water or fire, or something.

What does "do not need to rely on flames" mean?

It's completely opposite to what I said, because the situation has changed with the help of fire. I just saw something red fly by my eyes when a gust of hot wind blows past me, and the resurrection group nearby starts burning. Only then do I know that someone is setting them on fire.

It's not flaming arrows, more like shuriken or low-flying sparrows. The flying flames coming non-stop send Yelshi's army into disarray. No, to be exact the live soldiers are a mess, the resurrection group don't care either way even if they're made into target practice.

Judging from this situation, I can only decide for sure that they have no emotions, and that it's going to take a lot to try and escape even in this commotion.

The good thing about having a healthy hostage is that they can escape on their own. Not only can I use my legs to run away, I can also volunteer as bait.

I roll and use the momentum to knock aside a nearby soldier (a precious living person), and then I grab his knees tightly, trying to pull him off the horse.

Some members of the resurrection group reach out to catch me, even waving

their swords to try and prevent my actions. Come on, please give me more flames, just mess these guys up a little bit...

Everyone is shocked by the flames soaring through the sky from behind them, and hurriedly turn back to look.

"Who just did..."

Only then do they see two torches advancing slowly in the pitch-black world, and that's the direction where the flames are coming from too, the previously weak blue flames shooting off after an increase in temperature and change in color. The flames fly into the ranks of the resurrection group, and immediately start burning.

"Stop! What are you doing!? Don't use fire!"

The shooters approach them slowly, until finally they can see what the strangers look like. At first they were wondering why these people were so carefree, until they realize that the shooters aren't riding horses.

"Why is it donkeys again?"

Venera can't help but mutter as the girls holding torches ride up to them on a couple of mules, and has to wonder exactly how long they took to reach here, but those two brave and combative girls aren't the reason the equestrian people are making a ruckus.

The two donkeys are dragging something wrapped in a thick wool carpet between them, although it's a little worn on the surface, that is indeed—

The up-and-coming star of the desert, the mermaid.

The mermaid has come to the battlefield! That is enough to fire up the equestrian people, when in fact the person inside is Nigel Weiss Maxine—the man who shaved off his beard.

Completely uninterested in mermaids, Conrad gets onto horseback without

paying him any attention, and scouts the enemy base from above, desperately looking for that hostage who's moving about everywhere.

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"Jason, Freddy!"
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Keeping exceptionally calm, Wolfram tries to stop the shooters trying to rush at Yelshi.

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"Eh, you guys..."
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While he tries to search the memories of his current life, the twins are still advancing on their brave donkey steeds.

"Wait a sec, just hold on, you two! Don't use fire, you can't attack them with fire! There's a dangerous weapon there, if the fire causes a huge impact it'll open the Box... Hm—explode? It might explode too, so it's too dangerous to attack with fire!"

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"Box?"
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The twins repeat the word in unison, and cock their hands confusedly on donkey-back,

"But Yuuri's soul is there."

"We, see soul."

"Rescue him?"

"Rescue him from there."

With that the two of them exchange a glance, and nod.

The carpet in between the two donkeys also makes a 'patter-patter' sound, which probably means the mermaid agrees with them as well.

"I don't have the time to explain now, in any case you can't use fire to attack."

Jason and Freddy's surprise attack isn't the only danger the Box is facing, the small elite tracking team of the equestrian tribe also makes a strange sound before launching an attack on Yelshi's army, yelling, "Mermaid, breathe fire! Mermaid, breathe fire!" To them, the mermaid lying in between the donkeys, Maxine, is worth more than the gallant donkey-riding twins.

[&]quot;Box."

"All of you stop, be careful! The hostage... Yuuri is still there, you know!?"

He doesn't have the physical power or any ability in combat, so Murata can only stand and stare helplessly as he mutters,

"Damn! This is why random forces like this are uncontrollable!"

"Your Eminence!"

Looks like it's not just the equestrian people, even Conrad is ready to move out.

"I really can't just sit here and watch, since it's dangerous for Wolfram to approach, then I'll..."

"Of course not! Lord Weller, you are the only person here who's confirmed to be a Key! Even if you're the Key for 'Wind's End', you might still open other Boxes, so how could I let you go?"

"But if this goes on..."

"Even if your arm has lost its strength since it's a replacement, what if something goes wrong this time as well? That's why I only sent Grantz." "How about after Yuuri leaves the Box!?"

"You should call him His Majesty, right, Lord Weller? Once Yuuri has gotten away, you can go pick him up—But before that, you go over to the back and cut off their escape route, don't give them a chance to get away."

Conrad turns his horse away reluctantly, and Murata feels suddenly uneasy, thinking to himself, "Will he listen to my orders?"

"Which direction did Sizemore head off to?"

Wolfram replies immediately,

"North-east."

"Then let's head there too."

"And abandon Yuuri!?"

"Of course we're taking him along, but we can't let the enemy escape for that, it'll be even more troublesome if they don't try to chase us. The two girls and the mermaid come along too. What else can you do other than flames? Do you know

Ki? Y'know, the thing where you compress the air and blow your enemy away. I hope you can circle over to the east side, and pressure them from the side. As for us, we'll lure them into advancing towards the north-east, and hope they will give chase, all the way to the north of the continent."

"Okay."

The fair twins don't hesitate at all, nodding in reply instantly.

"Go with that suspicious big brother over there."

So the brave donkeys carrying two people (and a mermaid) follow behind Lord Weller.

"And then... Oh, yeah, we still need a bait to lead the way, that's a very dangerous job."

"Then I'll go."

"Mn, since you represent the slave class, I'll have to ask you to go straight for the target destination. And then there's Lord von Bielefeld."

Murata raises his head and narrows his eyes. Although his vision isn't very clear, he can still see that person's beautiful appearance. Not bad, he's a very good candidate for marriage.

"There should be good news on Shibuya's side soon, and your value is on the rise as well."

"Got it, then I'll be the bait."

"Great, I'm counting on you. There should be half of the enemies going after you straight away, but foot soldiers won't go too fast. Do you know where to lead them to?"

"The north end of the continent."

"That's right."

After that it's probably going to be Yuuri's strategy coming into play, he can only hope it goes smoothly.

The most important thing in this world is timing, Shibuya.

As he watches his comrades prepare to move out, Murata murmurs,

"The most important thing is timing, Shibuya. Whether we're lucky or not is all in the timing."

I fall on my butt in order to avoid an attack, and to make things worse, a zombie soldier is right in front of me, even raising his rusted iron sword up high. Thinking "I'm a goner!", I raise my arm in front of me, and squeeze my eyes shut instinctively.

However, what I feel in the next second isn't pain from my arm, but a surprising breeze. And then the sword, a notch cut out of its blade, falls to the ground with a deep clang.

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(Don't kill him!)

"Yelshi—"
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The Seisakoku Emperor appears eight feet away from me, back on horseback. What is this, I ran with all my might, and only got eight feet away?

There's a cart tied to horses behind him, and everything looks ready to go. The Forbidden Box and his precious mother are of course properly seated on the cart. Letting his aged mother ride a cart, isn't that a bit too stingy? Looking at his nonchalant expression, I can't help the urge to scold someone.

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(He's an important Key, we must take him away.)
"I told you, I'm not a Key!"
"Then who is?"
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Yelshi looks calm and composed on the surface, only talking to me in simple common language, but it's a completely different matter inside. The sudden fire attacks and the equestrian people's charge has sent the rear into disarray, and after things got this bad, to get the Key wrong as well makes him feel agitated and confused.

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"I can't say."

(Don't tell me it's those two who just left!? I see, I get it now...)
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The thoughts hat reach my brain next aren't words or voices, but a feeling like turning circles in a washing machine, it's probably the intense unease he feels. It makes me feel dizzy too. Even if it's a big impact on him, can my brain put up with such a feeling as well?

(So that's why the first double-black let you come here? Because they're Keys, because one of them is the Key to open the Box of Life!)

I don't want to correct him anymore, that's not the Box of Life.

When the continuous stream of thoughts is suddenly interrupted, Yelshi raises his head in surprise, looking to the left. After murmuring a bunch of things the ring can't receive, he suddenly yells out,

(It's that man!)

My features contort in pain, and I raise my hands to cover my ears. The truth is his thoughts don't reach me through my hearing, so it's pointless even if I cover my ears. His gaze goes past several rows of the resurrection group on the left, staring at that golden hair glowing a fiery red in the torchlight. But those emerald eyes, its color looking even more complex with red mixed in, are shining with a light even brighter than his hair.

Wolfram turns back deliberately, even smiling a challenge, then he slowly kicks the stomach of his horse, purposely taking off at a speed we can catch up with.

Seeing this act of his, Yelshi naturally takes the bait. From the cavalry to the foot soldiers, from the few living soldiers to the near two hundred zombies, his entire army starts chasing Wolfram.

That's only natural, because this group moves completely based on him, on Yelshi's will.

In order to keep up with the pursuers speed, I look around hurriedly and grab on to the cart that's dashing ahead. I sure don't want to stay behind and keep the zombie foot soldiers company.

Next to me are the Box that's behind all this commotion, and Alazon's... driedup corpse. I try my best not to get close to her, my body leaning on the sturdy Box. Relax, I'm not the Key to this Box. That's right, I'm not the Key to the Box. Now isn't the time to think about these things. Although I'm on a cart, but the horses are still running really fast in the desert, and the cart carrying the Box, Alazon and I also sways vigorously. The previous monarch of Seisakoku only sat still and properly at the very start, but as we advanced further, the vibrations knock her out of place too, and she even almost rolls onto the ground because we're going too fast.

I don't know what to do either, but an elderly is facing difficulties in a vehicle, and as a fellow passenger, of course I can't just ignore that. And she... Although she is a mummy, she was still the leader of a country, if she were to get injured... No, if she were to get damaged, it feels like I'd be cursed.

So I try to pull Alazon's waist back, while trying my best not to touch her directly.

"Aaaah!"

It snapped.

Her waist broke in half with a loud snap, and now her upper body is sprawled forward. Prostrating mummy, I'm really very sorry. But it's still better than smashing into smithereens on the ground. On the swaying cart, I use all my strength to pull her back, and lean her back into her original chair.

Just then, the book with the yellow leather cover slides off from Alazon's knee. When I pick it up with my right hand, then reach out to try and return it to its owner, the horses dragging the cart suddenly screech to a stop.

What to do? Although it's a mummy, but my face is buried in the chest of a married woman... No, no way, although she is a married woman, the biggest problem should be that my face is buried in the chest of a mummy, right? Thank goodness we have a thick layer of clothes between us.

But Yelshi, only this is undeniable.

I mutter at the ring. This gadget is a communication device that relays Yelshi's thoughts one-way, so no one can hear my monologue, but I have to say it.

Alazon's heart isn't beating.

As I thought, this person's soul is already gone.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

After that, almost everything goes according to my plan.

The place we're supposed to lure Yelshi to is the facility where Jason and Freddy are, at the northern-most end of the continent. If Sizemore and Dacascos, who were sent out scouting, couldn't meet up with the special forces team nearby, then they were to head for the north of the continent directly, based on the situation—because I ordered them to head for the facility first.

Luckily, they followed my instruction and reached the facility first, even rendezvousing with the nearby teams, and were waiting for us there.

And then Saralegui, who had escaped with a member of the equestrian tribe, fulfilled his promise as well. At first I thought there was only a fifty-fifty... No, a thirty-seventy chance that he would do as I asked him, but the results are surprising.

Saralegui escaped to the facility I mentioned, and told the shinzoku guards he met, in Seisakoku language,

"I'm being chased by the dead."

As well as,

"On the way back from my family tombs, I was attacked by an army of the dead, and only a few of my guards managed to survive. Thankfully I met this equestrian person, his riding skills are the only reason we could throw off the dead. But those things would surely come after me here."

When someone who has the same face and voice of the boy emperor says that, even soldiers stationed in the middle of nowhere would fall over themselves to protect their monarch. Saralegui, posing as Yelshi, continues,

"Those members of the dead used a strange houjutsu to make us lose

consciousness, and then they controlled us when everyone is dazed. The surviving guards were tragically taken down as well, and now they've become puppets controlled by the enemy. If I'm struck by those guys' houjutsu again, there's a high chance I'll be taken away. Listen up, everyone, even if I'm standing with those things, that just means I've been controlled, don't treat me as the enemy! Just aim for the dead, you just have to deal with the dead!"

All that may sound confusing normally, but to the excited guard captain, that's perfect news. After all, to soldiers whose usual job is watching over the slaves, this is an important event that comes once in a lifetime. Faced with an emergency situation coming in like a tsunami, very few people can maintain their cool.

At a time like this, Saralegui used a reverse-manipulation method to impersonate the Seisakoku emperor, as expected of the self-proclaimed substitute. But the equestrian person who followed him probably only thought, "Goodness" The substitute is up to his usual tricks again."

Afterwards he said, "I hate owing people debts!" But the truth is he had no other choice, and had to cooperate obediently even if it's a plan by a rookie like me. In life, there are times when enemies end up on the same boat.

Anyway, that's how the theatre major Shou Shimaron king, Saralegui pulls in the Seisakoku guards who were guarding their borders dutifully into becoming our allies. Just as the agitated guards are raising their swords and yelling, "Defeat the dead, protect His Majesty!", Sizemore, Dacascos and about ten members of our special forces team have already slipped through the loose defenses and released the slaves in the facility. We don't let them escape immediately, though, instead we're looking for a suitable opportunity to hand them over to Venera.

By the time Yelshi's army, carrying the Box and me, reach the northern end of the continent with Wolf and Venera, who had successfully fulfilled their roles as guideposts, the facility where they kept those who returned from overseas had already had a 'WELCOME, dead people' party poised and ready.

Even if the ones who rush in there are a part of the boy emperor's actual army, since his men are all members of the resurrection group who look terrifying and

rather unlucky, they are treated as the enemy instead.

Although I say soldiers, in truth there are only about twenty guards at the facility. By sheer numbers alone, Yelshi has an overwhelming advantage.

Although the men fight the resurrection group bravely, the difference of almost five times in manpower will decide the outcome of this battle.

Just then, Hazel Graves makes a signal as Venera.

She tells her many comrades in the facility, to fight for Yelshi.

They're mostly rather powerless slaves, and their time in the facility has also weakened their bodies, but Venera still says,

"Even so, there isn't a citizen in this world who wouldn't protect the leader of their country. Even if he's a king who tortured us for so long, and wouldn't listen to our voices, there still isn't a citizen who would hand their leader over to the dead!"

Surprisingly, all her comrades obey her, sitting on horseback with her right hand clenched into a fist and raised high. I really admire someone like her, a true leader, and my admiration is so much that I can't help but pat the mummy's shoulder.

So everyone holds up their household weapons... in other words, pickaxes and shovels, yelling, "Return our home, return to ashes!" as they fight, making the whole scene into an extremely rare crusade battle. I really don't want to think back on that scene.

I jump down from the cart carrying the Box and ready to escape, since I have to find Murata, as well as the lead bait, Wolfram. But I barely get a few steps away before I hear Yelshi's voice, full of authority, and a few members of the resurrection group block my path. Damn, he shouldn't have noticed me.

One zombie seems to be suspecting what my object of subjugation^[1]... in other words, what this wooden baseball bat can do, but the problem is I already showed I was unarmed during the hostage exchange, so I don't have any weapon on my hands at all. I don't have a wooden rod or a stick or a pan or a mace. In that case, I might as well use Alazon's bones...

The three zombies standing in front of me suddenly vanish, and my field of vision turns wide. One of them has been beheaded, and the other two are destroyed as well, their bones scattered across the ground with what looks like no hopes of recovery. That's not something a blunt sword can do, but a blow from the back by a bigger, heavier blade.

"Josak..."

He's standing with his back to the moon. I can't see his eyes, face, or mouth, only his shadow extending to my feet.

But with only that I can't tell if Josak Gurrier is a friend or enemy. If I don't go closer, I really won't know if he's returned to normal or still under someone's control.

In front of me, Josak twirls the heavy broadsword that can cut a person in half with the power from his wrist alone.

"Josak, I'm asking you."

My words end there, but we don't move or speak, like two wax statues frozen on the spot.

Someone seems to be calling my name from a distance. It's a comrade's voice. Although I want to say, "Forget about me, go look for Murata", I keep feeling as though if I make a careless move now, the balance in front of me will collapse, and so I'm too scared to make a sound.

The person who broke through the stalemate isn't me, and neither is it Josak.

"Conrad!?"

I couldn't stop him in time. Body tilting forward, footsteps flying, even if he tripped on the sand and lost his balance, Conrad still used his unsheathed blade to block the broadsword in Josak's hands.

"I said it before, I will kill you with my own two hands!"

For a split second, he smiles that gentle smile I know so well,

"Kill you with my own two hands."

He draws his sword and deflects the broadsword with the notch before even

finishing his sentence, but Josak doesn't relax his grip, instead using the momentum to bring the blade that had been lifted over his head down hard. The two metal weapons clash with a dull sound, the blades drawing out a line of silver and lighting sparks between the two men.



I try to stop them, yelling, "You two are good friends, don't do this!" But if I barrel in at a time like this, I'll definitely get hurt. Not only that, one of them may lose their balance trying to avoid me, and might even get fatally wounded, so I can only stay where I am helplessly.

Conrad takes one step back.

"Move aside and take it easy, you couple of good friends!"

Suddenly Adalbert comes in from Josak's side, though Josak already reacted to his voice. It looks like Adalbert jumped down from a height, and so just manages to step in between the two. He uses his back and muscular shoulders to forcefully push Conrad back.

"Adalbert!"

"Don't tell me you two were actually fighting seriously!? I said I'd do it! And besides didn't we say over and over again that you mustn't approach the Box... Whoa whoa whoa!"

Adalbert steps back to avoid the tip of the blade closing in on him, even laughing approvingly. I watch him bounce around happily, switching his sword to the other hand so he can wave his right hand,

"That was too close, too close, looks like I really can't afford to underestimate a survivor of Arnold."

Of course Josak doesn't stop attacking while he's talking. When his sword is blocked, he changes his stance by holding it with both hands and stabbing at Adalbert. That way, it's easier for him to get closer to Adalbert, whose moves tend to open and close widely.

Adalbert should be used to these kinds of attacks too, though, dodging with ease every time it seems his skin is about to be sliced open. And when Josak dashes straight at him, he easily avoids him at a hair's breadth as well.

But Josak doesn't fall over, using the tips of his toes to force his body to a stop. Even so, his upper half is now completely unprotected. If his opponent were to get a hit in now, he would surely sink into the sand. However, Adalbert also loses his balance, only taking one big step with his right leg.

"Tskl"

I hear someone tut their tongue. The tip of Josak's sword presses in, cutting open the clothes on Adalbert's chest, and a jet black liquid spurts out.

"Grantz?"

The little bottle splits in half, falling onto the dry sand, but that liquid isn't blood. It looks a lot like blood under the moonlight and torchlight, but it's not anyone's blood, just the liquid in Adalbert's bottle.

But my relief lasts only a second, because Josak is crouching on the ground, groaning like a beast. His left hand is covering his eyes, and he even drops his sword to the ground, until finally he just falls to the floor and rolls around in pain.

"Josak's... eyes..."

"Adalbert, what liquid was that?"

"I don't know, anyway it's a potion from the Red Devil. The only thing we can be sure about is that it's nothing good."

"Could it be poison!? Josak!"

"Let go of me!"

I want to help Josak up, but Conrad stops me. Since I'm behind him, I can't see too clearly, but it seems like he did something near Josak's neck, and sure enough Josak's limbs stop moving.

"Josak, don't tell me..."

"It's okay, he's not dead. No, more importantly, Your Majesty, he..."

"Yuuri! Found you found you, I finally found you! Eh, what's up with him? Did he die again?"

As I'm looking at Josak lying on the ground, the words that slip out of Saralegui's mouth really upset me. But Saralegui did indeed help a lot in the plan this time. If it weren't for him, we wouldn't have been able to pull the guards at

the facility to our side. Thinking of that, I force myself to keep my emotions in check.

Saralegui wasn't chased by either friend or foe, and I don't know when he managed to dart past so many swords and shovels to get to where I am. As for where I am, it's also really close to his little brother.

"Sara, what are you doing?"

"Hi, Yelshi. You look really energetic, huh. Don't tell me you plan on throwing your big brother aside and galloping into the sunset on your own?"

"Are you an idiot? When two people who look exactly the same show up at the same time, they'll see through it for sure!?"

"Then I'll hide you... Oh dear!"

He was planning to joke around at first, but shut up as soon as he sees the thing on the cart. In the beginning I thought Saralegui saw Alazon's remains, and was shocked into silence, yet it seems the thing he's interested in isn't his mother's dried corpse, but the large object next to it instead.

"Ahaha, so it's in a place like this, how unexpected."

Saralegui laughs hysterically, his gaze going between me, Yelshi, and the Forbidden Box.

"Goodness, ignorance sure is scary, Yuuri. Don't tell me Yelshi wanted to use you to test this Box?"

His every move is suspicious to me, but I still nod and reply,

"That's right."

"He must have no idea what this is, then. All that about the power to control the dead, don't tell me he thought this Box is full of stuff like that? It's obviously not. And after seeing Yuuri's majutsu yesterday, to think he still thought the Maou is the Key, what an idiot. You saw such a magnificent water dragon, and still didn't realize that Yuuri's element is water! You actually thought the current Maou who controls water can release 'Inferno on the Tundra'!"

"Sara, how did you..."

How did he know that this is 'Inferno on the Tundra'? Where did the information leak? Or did he know from the start, and was hiding it with his superior acting skills?

"Yuuri, I really want to correct something you said before. Yelshi and I aren't alike at all, not in the slightest! Ah—Really, he's just too dense, I can't believe we share the same blood!"

Saralegui doesn't notice my suspicions, continuously poking fun at his little brother,

"I finally understand why you could only inherit Seisaoku, you big moron."

"There's no need to challenge him that much..."

"Shh—Be quiet, Yuuri. Yelshi controls all his zombie subordinates, and treats them like pieces on a chess board. Oh, yeah! Lord Weller, aren't you really good at bad jokes?"

Adalbert's expression changes drastically as he carries the unconscious Josak onto his shoulder, and he prepares to escape.

"Eh!? What!? Is it okay if it's related to the presidential election?"

"As long as it has anything to do with race, it's forbidden--! What could you say... something like a nice fellow in a good mood!"

As soon as he hears my words, Conrad's mouth turns downwards, and the arms that were blocking off the enemy stop as well,

"What --?"

"D-don't stop moving your hands, aah--!"

I was rejected by Lord Weller, and hurt beyond words, I had hoped to get a compliment from him, too... Next to me, Saralegui claps his hands together loudly, as though about to bring out his final trick,

"Alright—Now I will announce a meaningless fact—Before Yelshi turned three, he was always hiding in Mother's chest, y'know—"

Yelshi stiffens where he stands, his face slowly turning red, as the rest of us harbor suspicions in our hearts,

"Why would he hide inside..."

"How would I know..."

"The fact that I didn't say that in Seisakoku language is a sign of your big brother's love for you, Yelshi. That's the only reason your men don't know about it now."

Just then, something completely unexpected happens.

There is an archer with really bad archery skills among the Seisaskoku guards, who are currently out allies. Not only is it dangerous to let loose arrows in the middle of a chaotic battle like this, he even neglects some basic understand that elementary school kids know, shooting flaming arrows from the facility's tall observation tower. Maybe he thinks that setting the luggage on fire would destroy the undead, but the spectacularly lousy archer doesn't notice that their king Yelshi isn't that far from the thing he's aiming at, and shoots with all his might.

The flaming arrow cuts through the night, aiming straight for its target—the Forbidden Box, 'Inferno on the Tundra'.

"His Eninence said we can't use fire!"

Although quite a few people noticed it, but no one can keep up with the speed of the arrow, so no one could stop it in time.

They just watch quietly as the burning arrow hits something with a 'thunk!' before reaching the wooden box. That was when Alazon, sitting next to the Box, fell over, taking the arrow directly as though protecting the Box, and taking it straight in the heart, too.

The people around her don't even have the time to register their surprise before the dried-up body burns and explodes rapidly. All we see are burning pieces of the corpse scattering onto the earth of her motherland.

Yelshi screams, a sound so tragic it doesn't seem to belong to this world.

When the sky turns pale white, I finally reunite with Murata on the desert

covered with zombie parts.

We're just like brothers who were nearly separated by death, hugging each other tightly. We touch each other's arms and backs, reassuring ourselves that the other person is bruised but not broken, and we don't stop.

"Murata, ah—Really, damn..."

Thank goodness you're still alive.

"Thank goodness you're still alive."

"Shibuya, I'm the one who wants to say that. Have you any idea how worried I was. In order to find you on Earth, even your brother was running around everywhere..."

With that my friend sighs, the shoulders I'm hugging sagging as though the air was let out of them.

"Sigh--"

"What? What happened?"

"I thought I was a goner for sure."

His eyebrow droop in fear, and his words come haltingly, completely unlike his usual, bright and lively self. I assume he feels uneasy, so I grab his cheeks with my hands, and touch his forehead with mine rather roughly. I guess it would be more accurate to say I 'butted' his head, and I even smile to show I controlled my power.

"Relax, I'm here for you."

Even if he has memories of the past so long I can't even imagine, he's still my friend of the same age.

"It's alright now, Ken."

"Please don't talk like the doctor, okay, Yuu-chan?"

Murata can't help but laugh too.

"Don't make yourself sound so mighty. The only reason I tortured myself so badly just to get here, is because you went missing, you know?"

"Please, you're the paperwork expert, I'd be just as healthy and lively without you."

"That's not what I meant!"

His tone grows stronger at the end of the sentence, and I think 'then what do you mean?' as I wait for him to continue.

"I wanted to find you myself, I wanted to find you with these hands, and these eyes!"

The words that come out are thanks. But it sounds very comical to my ears, so I just nod in reply.

"I always wanted a true comrade I don't have to hide and act around, a friend I can share everything with."

"Mn."

"I always wanted a friend like you."

"Mn."

"So I had to find you myself."

Wondering why all I can do is to keep nodding my head, I take out the glasses from my pocket and put them on Murata's dirty face. I'm not used to it, though, so I just can't seem to do it right. But Murata still waits patiently for me to put it on him, only raising his head when his vision is restored.

I'm really happy to see you.

Venera and Wolfram walk over to us, wearing tired smiles. Although they look exhausted, their smiles are still full of joy. Wolfram unsheathed sword is covered in scraps of meat and skin. In many ways, this was a nightmarish battle.

Her laugh lines even more obvious now, Venera says happily,

"GENTLEMEN, you guys did well!"

Wolfram finds Saralegui crouching down next to his little brother, and says in a rare, happy tone, as though to take revenge for that arrow back then,

"I heard the ships your country sent are turning circles like a lost child out there in the ocean, looks like Shou Shimaron's navigational skills need some work, huh."

It's almost dawn.

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Yuuri is calling the bat an "ANALOG CONTROLLER"

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

After the night of the chaotic battle gave way to dawn, the country of white sand at the ends of the ocean changed drastically. This is the first time in Seisakoku history that slaves helped soldiers to save the Emperor's life. Not just the slaves, but the equestrian people and the soldiers all know what happened last night, so it has become an undeniable truth—that the ones who were never recognized as shinzoku saved the Emperor.

The country might not change suddenly, but it is indeed changing, slowly listening to the voices of the oppressed.

"Give my life to this child."

Sitting on a narrow staircase in the secret port for pirates and smugglers, Hazel Graves is reading a certain woman's diary. Her finger wanders over the surface, reading aloud any beautiful scenes as though it is poetry,

"Give my everything to this child... When faced with the death of a loved one, any person would descend into a grief where you have to choose between a rock and a hard place."

Wolfram and I, with two girls grabbing our waists, walk slowly on the uneven stone steps. The salty sea breeze sure feels comfortable.

"I wonder who helped her fulfill her wish. Her son was revived, but Alazon didn't die immediately. Although this situation is slightly surprising, the fact is that her heart didn't stop immediately. Instead, she weakly, slowly... passed away. For example, by the end of that year she couldn't move her legs, and by the next year it was her arms. Soon her insides started to rot... and slowly she died. She thought of her son's life as more important than her own, so she helped him extend his life. Whoever it was that helped her fulfill that wish, it's just too tragic."

"If you ask me, it's more of a horror movie than a miracle."

"The young Empress Alazon was very lively, but afterwards she rarely showed up in public anymore, so this is the reason why."

"Does it have something to do with the Box?"

"Well, who knows? According to His Eminence the Sage, that Box can only 'destroy', right?"

"It seems so."

"In that case, maybe it was a god they worship, or the soul of a royal in the tombs or the underground tunnel. Think about it, that woman carried a dead baby into the underground tunnel that could fulfill her wish! And besides, that unlucky Box may have some functions the Sage doesn't know about. Or else—"

With a melodic sound, Hazel closes the diary and hands it to me,

"—It could be a miracle brought by Alazon's own power. I really can't say for sure... Eh?"

As though it's her first time seeing them, she stares at Jason and Freddy, asking,

"So you're the two lovely young ladies who were worried for me?"

The twins are surprisingly docile and timid, their usual arrogance completely gone, as though they understand it's not good to probe into someone else's help. Although I don't know who taught them that, but how polite of them.

"You girls told me to 'help Venera', right? That Venera, is this person here... Hazel Graves?"

The twins raise their heads in unison,

"Hope you can help her."

"Right, with majutsu."

"With majutsu?"

Again they nod at the same time.

"That's right."

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"What do you mean by 'help'? What do you want me to do? Help her abolish slavery in this country?"
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"No."

"That, we'll do ourselves."

What impressive determination.

"Then..."

"Heal her."

"That's right, heal her. Heal Venera's body."
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Even if they ask me to, but Venera... Hazel Graves was just fighting valiantly on the battlefield, it sure doesn't look like she's sick. As for the person in question, she can't understand the common language, so her expression is one of surprise,

"If it's possible, could you say that in this country's language? Oh, right, those children seem unfamiliar with the Seisakoku language, in that case English is okay, too, Your Majesty. Are you talking about me? You are talking about me, right?"

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"They want me to heal your body."

"But I don't remember being sick?"

"They say it's not a sickness."

My translation makes the twins nod even harder.

"No, we see, Venera's soul."

"Right, light of the soul."

"It's weakening."

"Since the first time we met, the light has been weakening, bit by bit."

"So you think it's a sickness."

"They did do something like a fortune telling before."
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The one who had his fortune told back then wasn't me, but Wolfram. But back then not only weren't they talking about weakening or whatnot, they even said he had a king's aura, so surely that must have made him happy?

"Is what they say accurate?"

Hearing my question, Wolfram thinks back for about ten seconds, his arms crossed over his chest and his left leg stretched slightly ahead, a hint of a smile on the corners of his lips,

"No, it's not accurate at all."

"It can't not be accurate!"

One of the twins, probably Freddy, seems really angry, and can't help but protest. But Hazel interrupts her,

"Are you done talking about me?"

"Not yet, Hazel. According to these children, your soul... Uh—Um, something like the light was really weak since the beginning, anyway they suspect that you're not feeling well somewhere."

"They said my light is really weak?"

Hazel Graves frowns, her mouth tightly closed, as she pulls her hair upwards with her hand,

"How troubling."

Her eyebrows droop as she says, perplexedly,

"Children, that's called aging."

"Fh?"

"If you know how long I've lived, you would definitely be in for a shock. Just among the slaves in this country, I should be the oldest. I'm far older than those nobles who enjoy all the best food in the palace, and have the best medical teams waiting on them twenty-four seven. Not only that, even if you go investigate the most resilient family, the Graves, there still isn't anyone who lived longer than me. However..."

The old lady winks like a child,'

"It's true that I don't know how long mazoku lifespans are."

"Mazoku lifespans are longer than you can imagine. As humans go, however, you are rather long-lived."

Hazel disappeared from Boston before World War II. Although I'm not too sure how to calculate the time in this world, seventy years have passed on Earth. If she was sixty-something-years-old back then, she would be at least a hundred and thirty years old now, and that's well enough to get into the Guinness Book of World Records.

Still, what's surprising isn't her age, but her strong body despite her age. She can live in such a tough environment even though she's over a hundred years old, doing back-breakingly hard work, even leading the slaves on a trip with us, and fighting to rescue her comrades. I can't say that she's as strong as a mazoku, but compared to humans on Earth, such a strong body is nothing short of a miracle. It's not just the body of flesh and bone either, even her mental resilience is highly admirable.

But Hazel Graves is telling everyone that her body is weakening. She's not sick, but aging.

"My eyes, nose, brain, limbs and waist all are. Oh, right, here too."

She raises her fist and beats her chest. Does she mean her heart, or her spirit?

"Because I'm old, my limbs are already shaking, and they become powerless if I use them for too long. So even if the flames of my soul become weak, it's nothing to be wondered at; in fact, it's completely normal."

Jason and Freddy seem to have figured out what she meant by the simple words she used, hugging my waist as they say,

"Heal her, we can't save her."

"Yuuri, use majutsu."

"Venera, hope. Venera is this country's hope."

"Everyone says so."

Those golden eyes shine with pleading and hope, until I'm at a loss on how to reply.

"Ah—That can't be cured."

Hazel herself has her hands on her waist, smiling really happily. It's the triumphant smile of a grandmother thinking, "Although my grandchildren said

some unattainable fantasy things, but they really are such adorable and bright children."

"Anyone would become an aged elderly person, that is something unavoidable, and uncurable. Although the rate I'm aging at is really slow, but after a long period of time, what will come will come."

"Hazel..."

"Since the light of my soul is weakening, that means that I'll have to embrace that moment soon. I have finally reached a place where I can see the gate to heaven."

"But to those of us who can't see something as troublesome as the soul, you are still strong despite your age, and also very beautiful."

Conrad, used to dealing with women, walks past and nonchalantly says something pleasant to the ears. That is an advanced speaking technique that I can't achieve, all I know is that he spoke really well.

"Hazel, I can't heal your aging, but there is one thing I might be able to do." Hazel Graves raises an eyebrow in surprise.

I don't complete my sentence, "I might be able to take you back to Earth", because I don't have the confidence. Even Murata and myself can't be certain when, at what point in time we'll land, and with so many uncertainties in the conditions, I really can't be sure I can bring an old lady I just met on the Star Tour successfully. It's just that, if she wants to return to Earth, there might be a hope of succeeding.

"Your suggestion is indeed very tempting, and I am very grateful, but I want to stay in this country."

"Although I don't know what are the chances of succeeding... Eh!?"

I am shocked into raising my head by the unexpected answer, but the adventurer's wrinkled mouth curves into a mischievous smile,

"I don't plan to go anywhere. If I return to Boston, those young relatives of mine may welcome me, but..."

She looks at someone in the distance beyond my shoulder, I'm guessing

Conrad, or maybe she's looking past him as well, looking for some other illusion. She sighs, and sings for a short while, but immediately stops.

"Since I've started this challenge, I might as well make it a long journey."

"You have a point."

"But isn't it pretty interesting, trying to become this country's Lincoln?"

"You want to become Seisakoku's president?"

"No, I don't want to be anyone great like that. But until now we're still not sure if we should make someone else as Emperor to replace Yelshi, maintaining the emperor system, or step in a little and make it back into a monarchy. In any case, I just hope to release the people from this illogical caste system."

Hazel looks around the small port from the narrow stone steps as she speaks. The people who just left the facility are loading cargo into the mazoku vessels, or accepting unneeded rations and supplies from the ships. As for the equestrian people who recovered really quickly, they are discussing something on their horses that still refuse to move forward. In such a crowded place, it'll probably be faster to move on your own two feet.

"After I've seen these children released from this tyranny with my own eyes, I plan on a quiet retirement."

"It shouldn't take too long, right?"

"I don't know, only God knows."

"Once the dust has settled, you will come to Shin Makoku for a visit, right? It's a great place, and the weather is beautiful."

Shin Makoku's good qualities flood my brain, and I realize that if I want to explain how wonderful my hometown is, it's probably not something I can finish saying in an hour or a day, but I can't say it clearly either, because the more I think back the more I want to just go back already, until my nose starts to burn.

"Don't ever forget, Venera. You are the goodwill ambassador, after all, you have a duty to come to my country and meet the king."

"I also want to have a chat with His Eminence, and listen about my granddaughter's adventures."

"I'll warn you beforehand, Murata's story is really long, so you must stay in Shin Makoku for quite some time. Just come to my country for a good rest, there are the hot springs women love so much there, too."

"You have a point."

Hazel Graves nods lightly, pulling her hair upwards with a smile.

Lord Weller, who walked past me just now, is now talking to Captain Sizemore near the mazoku ships.

"Although I can't order you, could I ask you for a favor as a friend?"

"Of course you can."

"Then please remove everything sharp, including the tables and chairs."

"I know, leave it all to me, I have experience escorting those wounded in battle too. Um... not just those who were wounded physically, but in other areas as well."

Captain Sizemore nods, his expression grim. Although I don't purposely want to lighten up the atmosphere, I still speak up in a cheery tone,

"Conrad!"

Conrad turns around to look at me with a steady smile.

"Where's Josak?"

"It seems he's been taken into the vessel Captain Sizemore arranged for. He's very quiet, it's just he looks dazed. Really, causing everyone so much trouble."

"Even Miss Gisela couldn't heal him, huh..."

"Even if she could heal his body, we can't fight poison with poison when it comes to his memories and spirit."

"Poison!? Then Miss Anissina..."

"No one knows what will happen. Although I can't be sure, you tend to have an idea already in your heart."

Conrad murmurs a famous tragedy.

"Shakespeare?"

"Although it's slightly different, all we can do now is gamble on it. Anyway, even if we have to do it by force, we must bring him back to Shin Makoku, we can't leave him on foreign soil no matter what."

"Of course."

When I remember the way Josak looked when his eyes were splashed by the liquid Adlabert brought, and he was rolling on the floor in pain, all the hairs on my body stand on end. But it's already much better than earlier, that moment when we were separated in the underground tunnel.

Compared to the despair from back then, the uneasiness I feel now is much lighter.

"It's okay as long as he's by my side, it's enough as long as he's still alive."

And then I clear my throat, changing the subject,

"Speaking of which, what does Lord Weller plan to do from now on?"

"Until Shou Shimaron's close guard land, I still have to watch Saralegui."

"The job of a bodyguard sure is tough. Ah~~ But since you were trained by me before, you should be used to it now, right?"

"No way, the pleasure in it is completely different."

Our conversation is like a child who likes to prank people. To the mazoku, this may be a meaningless experience, but I can't be a rookie forever. I researched economics a little, and I know politics more now. So I nonchalantly ask the suspicions I have from the term 'politics'.

"I say, Conrad, what do you mean by 'I went to sow seeds'? Don't tell me you want to gather up your supporters, and, um... try to regain the throne?"

"Of course not! I'm not made for that."

He denies it in surprise, but if we're judging if someone deserves the throne based on their talent, I'd be the least qualified. He tells me,

"It's impossible, I'm a narrow-minded man. I don't want to get any position,

just to spread my true intention. I want to tell them, my father and grandfather craved peace, not invasion. But it's really rather difficult to gain their trust... You really are a great person."

Conrad lowers his head slightly, his eyes narrowed and his smile bitter, exactly like the oldest son. That thought takes me off-guard, and in my daze I forget to ask something really important.

"Um..."

"I know, the Shimaron ships seem to have arrived."

The extravagant-looking ships block the narrow port until there's no space left, meaning Saralegui's ministers have arrived.

"Once the handing-over is complete, my mission would also be over. At that time, I will catch up immediately."

"It's okay if you take your time."

I forgot to ask, does his 'catch up' mean coming back to my side?

But someone has to stay behind.

"I have to stay behind!?"

"Don't you? Because you and the mermaid are the equestrian tribe's messiah, right?"

"Why the heck do I have to stay behind!? It's not like their village was damaged, they're completely unharmed, y'know!? Why do I have no choice but to stay behind as their designated chef!?"

"Anyway the term messiah is just a title, it's just that this incident made you into an accidental hero, and after this their deals with Yelshi and the former slaves will decide the direction of this country, am I right? If you're there to offer opinions from the side, I would be much more at ease. Because you're talented, and one of the Ten Aristocrats, plus you're really familiar with politics and governing territory. Wolfram mentioned before, the nobles' usual work is like the administrator of the territories. You're really good at delegating, aren't you? So I think you would stay behind, and help their administration from a side."

Adalbert hardens his expression as he uses his finger to touch his proud chin,

asking,

"Why must I listen to the Maou's orders?"

"Eh? Did I make any order? I don't remember, I just said, 'I think you would stay behind', y'know?"

"...I am the man who betrayed the mazoku, y'know!"

"So what?"

"If all goes well, I could even make this country anti-mazoku, y'know!"

"It's all right, go ahead."

I don't have any sense of uneasiness, that really is what I'm thinking. If he can do it, then go ahead, but he definitely won't do it.

"Besides, you already made a family here, didn't you? I heard, Adalbert! I heard you have a stern daughter and cute grandchildren? How mean of you not to tell me—As expected of the muscleman, the impressive butt-shaped chin! Good job, Grantz' young boss! From now on, you'll be living the 'Doki-doki!? Mermaid Life'."

Hearing me say that, Adalbbert's expression becomes very strange—

But I immediately hear something similar from Saralegui's side, apparently the Shou Shimaron king Saralegui is somewhere nearby, putting his grieving little brother to sleep. Since he's acting like the perfect older brother, his men who finally reached this port to receive him aren't blaming him.

"You're really not nervous at all? There's a high chance I would replace Yelshi as leader of this country, y'know!"

"If you really did that, it would just mean you have to fight it out with Venera and the others. And we don't know if you could decide the winner quickly, it might end up taking a long time, and in that case, what about Shou Shimaron?"

"I'll leave the best people in the country, it's not like I'm the only capable one."

"I'm not talking about the people you leave in the country, what I'm asking is, can you yourself leave your hometown?"

"Otherwise I could follow the original plan, and have Shou Shimaron and

Seisakoku form an alliance, making conditions favorable to our Shou Shimaron. That way, we'll have the shinzoku as powerful firepower, and we twins will govern twin countries to control the world's superpowers. Shin Makoku and Seisaskoku's alliance will fall behind Shou Shimaron's, you know?"

"It's okay, as long as you two get along, after all you are brothers. Go ahead and make up for the blank days in the past as family members, as country leaders that get along. Just like how me and my brother are so close."

I hope you two will become good brothers who would discuss how to make a move in front of me before doing it, who know each other so well you could be each other's body double.

"If you want to make any strange contracts, Venera and the equestrian tribes won't say quiet. To be honest, I don't know how much longer Yelshi's own dictatorship could have lasted. But I think you are really skilled politically, much better than I am. I trust that you have the ability to stabilize this country."

It's obvious that Saralegui figured out what I'm thinking long ago, but he still pretends, "So?"

"Support your lost little brother. You should lead him towards the right direction."

"Really, this pathetic little brother is just too much."

"Don't forget, there's a group of people who were tortured by your pathetic little brother for many years. Oh, right, this."

I hand the pale red ring and the leather-bound book to him. Murata helped me take off the ring. He strung silk thread between the finger and the stone, winding and tying a little before pulling it off. Thank goodness the ring came off before I decided to chop off my finger, it was a great help.

"I think Alazon's diary should be given to you for safekeeping. The contents are really long, extremely long. Your mother... Alazon..."



Saralegui's reply is even more decisive than I imagined,

"I knew long ago, I knew she was dead."

"Why?"

"Father told me. He told me what happened to the person who sent us away

from Seisakoku, I heard it was a sickness that made the body die gradually. Today it's the leg, tomorrow the arm, this year the lips, next year the eyelids."

"What a terrible sickness."

"Maybe it's not a sickness, but a curse. In any case, in the end it wasn't just Mother's physical body, but even her spirit was corroded. She even said she could see the dead, that the dead were surrounding her. It was after that I was chased out of the palace, the reason being I don't have the power I should have. That person even said, 'You are not my child!'"

He seems to be remembering a scary nightmare from the past, continuing to narrate that terrifying nightmare that he has almost forgotten,

"I still remember it clearly to this day. She let three-year-old me stand in the darkness, pulling my hair from behind so my head was facing up, and said over and over, 'You are not my child, Saralegui! So I definitely won't take you away!"

"Could that be she couldn't let you be taken away?"

"Why would you think so?"

"Read this diary if you have time. It's okay if you want to read it at night, just read it slowly on your own, this is already yours."

"Then I'll take it. Oh, yeah, Your Majesty Yuuri."

I had turned around and was about to leave when Saralegui asks me unhesitatingly. Although he just faced the fact that his mother died, he's still a truly greedy, and truly intelligent man.

"Do you know what happened to the Box? While I was caring for my little brother, it seems to have vanished."

"About that, who knows."

Just then Wolfram waves at me, so I leave the scene without replying. I really want to throw it somewhere, but I can't just leave it alone either. That is the sealed, ominous Box that the mazoku destroyed, and sealed. I really want to forget about it, but I think about it with every step, and it presses down on my chest every time I breathe, making me gasp for breath.

"Is your stomach okay?"

As soon as we're out of Saralegui's field of vision, Wolfram immediately looks apologetic, even saying,

"Sorry."

"Oh—That? Oh, right, Wolf, that punch really hurt! Although I was at fault too in the tunnel that time, you were wrong to hit me in the stomach. That is totally DOMESTIC VIOLENCE!"

Although it's not serious or common, Wolfram looks surprised to hear an unfamiliar term. What a bother, since I'm used to talking to Hazel, I'm starting to use a lot of Earth terms now.

"DOMES... what does that mean?"

"Hm—Something like in the country or a product of the country, I guess!"

"I already told you many times, I will formally ask for my due punishment once we get back..."

"No need, it doesn't matter if it's official or not, it's okay whenever you want to apologize."

He's about to say something formal again so I pat his back hard without hesitation, and it gives me a feeling of reality, like "Ah—right here". I'm here, and so is Wolfram.

"Because we're already back."

We're all here, be it Conrad, Murata... or Josak.

"I can't say for all of it, but I brought us back with my own strength."

"Uh-huh."

The sea breeze caresses Wolfram's hair, and he nods his head firmly in reply, very naturally extending his hand to me, standing on the side of the port,

"Come home, everyone is waiting for you."

Nobody knows how things will turn out in the future, but this country will definitely change.

I follow the creaking staircase as I climb upwards, preparing to return home.